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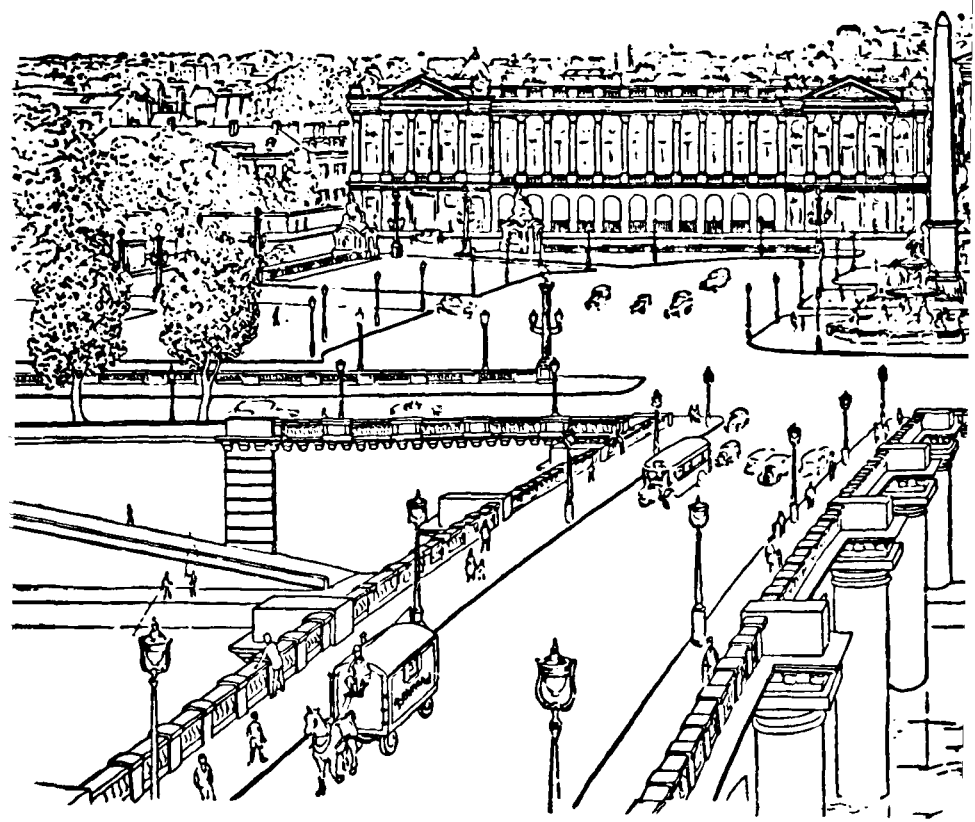

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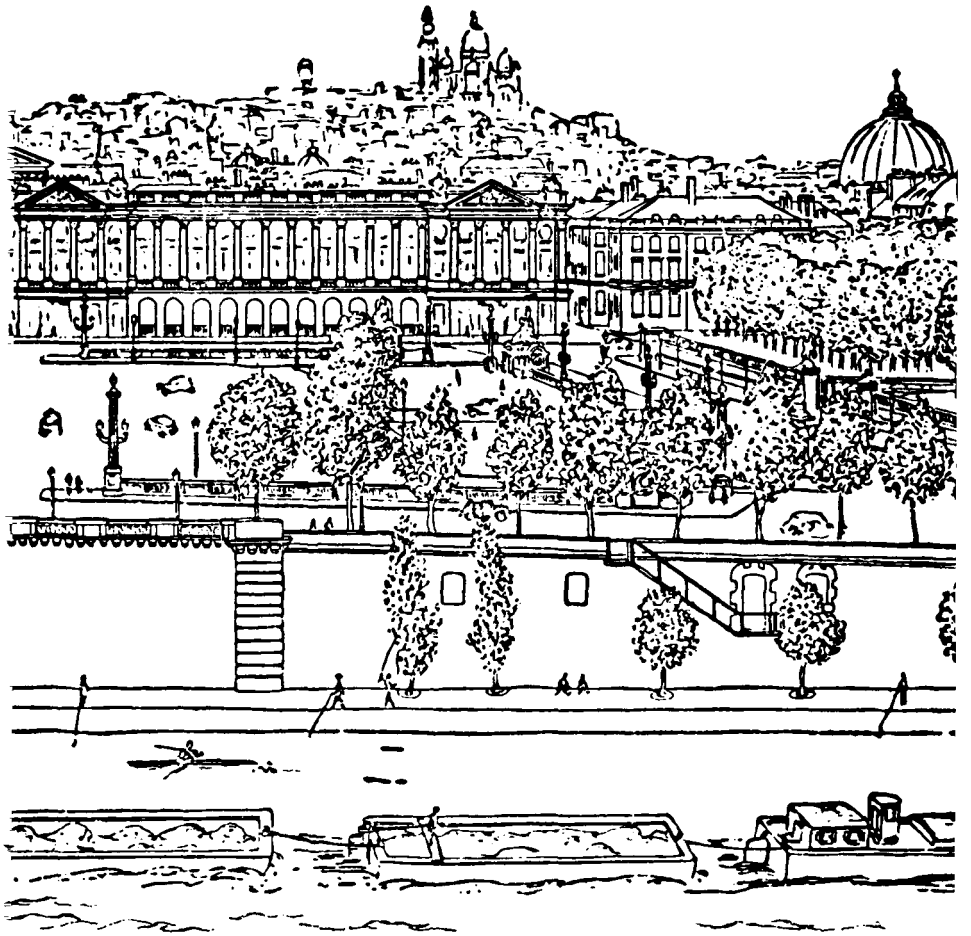

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NOTICE

The Paris Review is pleased to announce that it has a new publisher—Deborah S. Pease. Only the fourth publisher in this publication's near-thirty year history, she is the first truly literary person to hold the post. She is a novelist (*Real Life*, 1971), a short story writer (in *The New Yorker*), and a poet (her first published poem—in a fine nicety of continuum—appeared in *The Paris Review* in 1977). Her poetry has since been published in a number of small literary magazines. Upon accepting the post she wrote a note about such publications: "I owe a great deal to the dedication of editors, lovers of art and literature. I know the solitariness of an artist and the wild joy of a single act of recognition. *The Paris Review* recognizes life in all its creative expressions—despair, delight, rigor, craziness, the erotic and the aesthetic . . . and the fine sobriety of a formal interview. It helps to shatter—to paraphrase Kafka—the frozen sea within us. I feel honored to be its publisher."

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Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

Bob Gomel/Life Magazine

Ike and Nina

T. Coraghessan Boyle

The years have put a lid on it, the principals passed into oblivion. I think I can now, in good conscience, reveal the facts surrounding one of the most secretive and spectacular love affairs of our time: the *affaire de coeur* that linked the thirty-fourth president of the United States and the then first lady of the Soviet Union. Yes: the eagle and the bear, defrosting the Cold War with the heat of their passion, Dwight D. Eisenhower—Ike—virile, dashing, athletic, in the arms of Madame Nina Khrushcheva, the svelte and seductive schoolmistress from the Ukraine. Behind closed doors, in embassy restrooms and hotel corridors, they gave themselves over to the urgency of

Art: FEP, JN, HGW

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their illicit love, while the peace and stability of the civilized world hung in the balance.

Because of the sensitive—indeed sensational—nature of what follows, I have endeavored to tell my story as dispassionately as possible, and must say in my own defense that my sole interest in coming forward at this late date is to provide succeeding generations with a keener insight into the events of those tumultuous times. Some of you will be shocked by what I report here, others moved. Still others—the inevitable naysayers and skeptics—may find it difficult to believe. But before you turn a deaf ear, let me remind you how unthinkable it once seemed to credit reports of Erroll Flynn's flirtation with Nazis and homosexuals, F.D.R.'s thirty year obsession with Lucy Mercer or Ted Kennedy's overmastering desire for an ingenuous campaign worker eleven years his junior. The truth is often hard to swallow. But no historian worth his salt, no self-respecting journalist, no faithful eyewitness to the earth-shaking and epoch-making events of human history, has ever blanched from it.

Here then, is the story of Ike and Nina.

• • •

In September of 1959, I was assistant to one of Ike's junior staffers, thirty-one years old, schooled in international law and a consultant to the Slavic Languages program at one of our major universities.* I'd had very little contact with the president, had in fact laid eyes on him but twice in the eighteen months I'd worked for the White House (the first time I was looking for a drinking fountain when I caught a glimpse of him—a single flash of his radiant brow—huddled in a back room with Foster Dulles and Andy Goodpaster; a week later, as I was hurrying down a corridor with a stack of reports for shredding, I spotted him slipping out a service entrance with his golf clubs). Like dozens of bright ambitious young men apprenticed to the mighty, I was at this stage of my career a mere functionary, a paper shuffler, so deeply buried in the power structure I must actually have ranked below the pastry

*I choose not to name it, just as I decline to reveal my actual identity here, for obvious reasons.

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chef's croissant twister. I was good—I had no doubt of it—but I was as yet untried, and for all I knew unnoticed. You can imagine my surprise when early one morning I was summoned to the Oval Office.

It was muggy, and though the corridors hummed with the gentle ministrations of the air-conditioners, my shirt was soaked through by the time I reached the door of the president's inner sanctum. A crewcut ramrod in uniform swung open the door, barked out my name and ushered me into the room. I was puzzled, apprehensive, awed: the door closed behind me with a soft click and I found myself in the Oval Office, alone with the president of the United States. Ike was standing at the window, gazing out at the trees, whistling "The Flirtation Waltz" and turning a book of crossword puzzles over in his hands. "Well," he said, turning to me and extending his hand, "Mr. Paderewski, is that right?"

"Yes, sir," I said. He pronounced it *Paderooski.**

"Well," he repeated, taking me in with those steely blue eyes of his as he sauntered across the room and tossed the book on his desk like a slugger casually dropping his bat after knocking the ball out of the park. He looked like a golf pro, a gymnast, a competitor, a man who could come at you with both hands and a nine iron to boot. Don't be taken in by all those accounts of his declining health—I saw him there that September morning in the Oval Office, broad-shouldered and trim-waisted, lithe and commanding. Successive heart attacks and a bout with ileitis hadn't slowed the old warrior a bit. A couple of weeks short of his sixty-ninth birthday, and he was jaunty as a high-schooler on prom night. Which brings me back to the reason for my summons.

"You're a good egg, aren't you, Paderewski?" Ike asked.

I replied in the affirmative.

"And you speak Russian, is that right?"

"Yes sir, Mr. President—and Polish, Sorbian, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene as well."

He grunted, and eased his haunch down on the corner of the desk. The light from the window played off his head till it glowed like a second sun. "You're aware of the upcoming visit

*This is a pseudonym I've adopted as a concession to dramatic necessity in regard to the present narrative.

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of the Soviet premier and his, uh, wife?''

I nodded.

''Good, that's very good, Paderewski, because as of this moment I'm appointing you my special aide for the duration of *that visit.*'' *He looked at me as if I were some odd and insignificant* form of life that might bear further study under the microscope, looked at me like the man who had driven armies across Europe and laid Hitler in his grave. ''Everything that happens, every order I give you, is to be held strictly confidential—top secret—is that understood?''

I was filled with a sense of mission, importance, dignity. Here I was, elevated from the ranks to lend my modest talents to the service of the first citizen of the nation, the Commander-in-Chief himself. ''Understood, Mr. President,'' I said, fighting the impulse to salute.

This seemed to relax him, and he leaned back on the desk and told me a long, involved story about an article he'd come across in the *National Geographic*, something about Egyptian pyramids and how the members of a pharaoh's funeral procession were either blinded on the spot or entombed with their leaders—something along those lines. I didn't know what to make of it. So I put on my meditative look, and when he finished I flashed him a smile that would have melted ice.

Ike smiled back.

By now, of course, I'm sure you've guessed just what my special duties were to consist of—I was to be the president's liaison with Mrs. Krushchev, a go-between, a pillow-smoother and excuse-maker: I was to be Ike's panderer. Looking back on it, I can say in all honesty that I did not then nor do I now feel any qualms whatever regarding my role in the affair. No, I feel privileged to have witnessed one of the grand passions of our time, a love both tender and profane, a love that smoldered beneath the watchful eyes of two embattled nations and erupted in an explosion of passionate embraces and hungry kisses.

Ike, as I was later to learn, had first fallen under the spell of Madame K. in 1945, during his triumphal visit to Moscow after

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the fall of the Third Reich. It was the final day of his visit, a momentous day, the day Japan had thrown in the towel and the great war was at long last ended. Ambassador Harriman arranged a reception and buffet supper at the U.S. embassy by way of celebration, and to honor Ike and his comrade-in-arms, Marshal Zhukov. In addition to Ike's small party, a number of high-ranking Russian military men and politicos turned out for what evolved into an uproarious evening of singing, dancing and congratulatory back-slapping. Corks popped, vodka flowed, the exuberant clamor of voices filled the room. And then Nina Khrushcheva stepped through the door.

Ike was stunned. Suddenly nothing existed for him—not Zhukov, not Moscow, not Harriman, the armistice or "The Song of the Volga Boatmen" that an instant before had been ringing in his ears—there was only this vision in the doorway, simple, unadorned, elegant, this true princess of the earth. He didn't know what to say, didn't know who she was, the only words of Russian he could command—*zdrav'st* and *spasibo** flying to his lips like an unanswered prayer. He begged Harriman for an introduction, and then spent the rest of the evening at her side, the affable Ike, gazing into the quiet depths of her rich mud-brown eyes, entranced. He didn't need an interpreter.

It would be ten long years before their next meeting, years that would see the death of Stalin, the ascendancy of Khrushchev and Ike's own meteoric rise to political prominence as the thirty-fourth president of the United States. Through all that time, through all the growing enmity between their countries, Ike and Nina cherished that briefest memory of one another. For his part, Ike felt he had seen a vision, sipped from the cup of perfection, and that no other woman could hope to match—not Mamie, not Ann Whitman, not even his old flame, the lovely and adept Kay Summersby. He plowed through CIA dossiers on this captivating spirit, Nina Petrovna, wife of the Soviet premier, maintained a scrapbook crammed with photos of her and news clippings detailing her husband's movements; twice, at the risk of everything, he was able to communicate with her through the offices of a discreet and

*"Hello" and "thank you."

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devoted agent of the CIA. In July of 1955, he flew to Geneva, hungering for peaceful coexistence.

At the Geneva Conference, the two came together once again, and what had begun ten years earlier as a riveting infatuation blossomed into the mature and passionate love that would haunt them the rest of their days. Ike was sixty-five, in his prime, the erect warrior, the canny leader, a man who could shake off a stroke as if it were a head cold; Nina, ten years his junior, was in the flush of womanly maturity, lovely, solid, a soft inscrutable smile playing on her elfin lips. With a subterfuge that would have tied the intelligence networks of their respective countries in knots, the two managed to steal ten minutes here, half an hour there—they managed, despite the talks, the dinners, the receptions and the interminable, stultifying rounds of speech-making, to appease their desire and sanctify their love forever. "Without personal contact," Ike said at a dinner for the Russian delegation, his boyish blue eyes fixed on Mrs. Khrushchev, "you might imagine someone was fourteen feet high, with horns and a tail." Russians and Americans alike burst into spontaneous laugher and applause. Nina Petrovna, first lady of the Soviet Union, stared down at her chicken Kiev and blushed.

And so, when the gargantuan Soviet TU 114 shrieked into Andrews Air Force Base in September of 1959, I stood by my president with a lump in my throat: I alone knew just how much the Soviet visit meant to him, I alone knew by how tenuous a thread hung the balance of world peace. What could the president have been thinking as the great sleek jet touched down? I can only conjecture. Perhaps he was thinking that she'd forgotten him, or that the scrutiny of the press would make it impossible for them to steal their precious few moments together, or that her husband—that torpedo-headed bully boy—would discover them and tear the world to pieces with his rage. Consider Ike at that moment, consider the all but insurmountable barriers thrown in his way, and you can appreciate my calling him one of the truly impassioned lovers of all time. Romeo had nothing on him, nor Douglas Fairbanks

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The Khrushchevs with the Eisenhowers during the former's visit to Washington.

either—even the starry-eyed Edward Windsor pales by comparison. At any rate, he leaped at his opportunity like a desert nomad delivered to the oasis: there would be an assignation that very night, and I was to be instrumental in arranging it.

After the greeting ceremonies at Andrews, during which Ike could do no more than exchange smiles and handshakes with the premier and premiersha, there was a formal state dinner at the White House. Ambassador Menshikov was there, Khrushchev and his party, Ike and Mamie, Christian Herter, Dick Nixon and others; afterward, the ladies retired to the Red Room for coffee. I sat at Ike's side throughout dinner, and lingered in the hallway outside the Red Room directly thereafter. At dinner, Ike had kissed Madame K.'s hand and chatted animatedly with her for a few minutes, but they covered their emotions so well that no one would have guessed they were anything other than amenable strangers wearing their social faces. Only I knew better.

I caught the premiersha as she and Mamie emerged from the Red Room in a burst of photographers' flashbulbs. As instructed, I took her arm and escorted her to the East Room, for the program of American songs that would highlight the evening. I spoke to her in Russian, though to my surprise she seemed to have a rudimentary grasp of conversational English (did she recall it from her school-teaching days, or had she boned up for Ike?). Like a Cyrano, I told her that the president yearned for her tragically, that he'd thought of nothing else in

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the four years since Geneva, and then I recited a love poem he'd written her in English—I can't recall the sense of it now, but it boiled with Elizabethan conceits and the imagery of war, with torn hearts, manned bastions and references to heavy ordnance, pillboxes and scaling the heights of love. Finally, just before we entered the East Room, I pressed a slip of paper into her hand. It read, simply: *3:00 A.M., back door, Blair House.*

At five of three, in a rented, unmarked limousine, the president and I pulled up at the curb just down the street from Blair House, where the Khrushchev party had been installed for the night. I was driving. The rear panel slid back and the president's voice leaped at me out of the darkness: "Okay Paderewski, do your stuff—and good luck."

I eased out of the car and started up the walk. The night was warm and damp, the darkness a cloak, streetlights dulled as if they'd been shaded for the occasion. Every shadow was of course teeming with Secret Service agents—there were enough of them ringing the house to fill Memorial Stadium twice over—but they gave way for me. (Ike had arranged it thus: one person was to be allowed to enter the rear of Blair House at the stroke of three; two would be leaving an instant thereafter.)

She was waiting for me at the back door, dressed in pants, a man's overcoat and hat. "Madame Khrushcheva?" I whispered. "Da," came the reply, soft as a kiss. We hurried across the yard and I handed her into the car, admiring Ike's cleverness: if anyone—including the legion of Secret Service, CIA and FBI men—had seen us, they would have mistaken the madame for her husband and concluded that Ike had set up a private, ultra-secret conference. I slid into the driver's seat and Ike's voice, shaken with emotion, came at me again: "Drive Paderewski," he said, "drive us to the stars." And then the panel shot to with a passionate click.

For two hours I circled the capitol, and then, as prearranged, I returned to Blair House and parked just down the street. I could hear them—Ike and Nina, whispering, embracing, rustling clothing—as I cut the engine. She giggled. Ike was whistling. She giggled again, a lovely windchime of a sound, musical and coltish—if I hadn't known better I would have thought Ike

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was back there with a coed. I was thinking with some satisfaction that we'd just about pulled it off, when the panel slid back and Ike said: "Okay Paderewski—let's hit it." There was the sound of a protracted kiss, a sound we all recognize not so much through experience—who's listening, after all?—but thanks to the attention Hollywood sound men have given it. Then Ike's final words to her, delivered in a passionate susurrus, words etched in my memory as if in stone: "Till we meet again," he whispered.

Something odd happened just then, just as I swung back the door for Mrs. Khrushchev—a car was moving along the street in the opposite direction, a foreign car, and it slowed as she stepped from the limousine. Just that—it slowed—and nothing more. I hardly remarked it at the time, but that instant was to reverberate in history. The engine ticked up the street, crickets chirruped. With all dispatch, I got Mrs. Khrushchev round back of Blair House, saw her in the door, and returned to the limousine.

"Well done, Paderewski, well done," Ike said, as I put the car in drive and headed up the street, and then he did something he hadn't done in years—lit a cigarette. I watched the glow of the match in the rearview mirror, and then he was exhaling with rich satisfaction, as if he'd just come back from swimming the Potomac or taming a mustang in one of those televised cigarette ads. "The White House," he said. "Chop-chop."

Six hours later, Madame K. appeared with her husband on the front steps of Blair House and fielded questions from reporters. She wore a modest gray silk chemise and a splash of lipstick. One of the reporters asked her what she was most interested in seeing while touring the U.S., and she glanced over at her husband before replying (he was grinning to show off his pointed teeth, as impervious to English as he might have been to Venusian). "Whatever is of biggest interest to Mr. Khrushchev," she said. The reporters lapped it up: flashbulbs popped, a flurry of stories went out over the wire. Who would have guessed?

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From there, the Khrushchevs took a special VIP train to New York, where Madame K. attended a luncheon at the Waldorf and her husband harangued a group of business magnates in Averell Harriman's living room. "The Moscow Cha-Cha" and Jimmy Driftwood's "The Bear Flew Over the Ocean" blared from every radio in town, and a special squad of NYPD's finest—six footers, expert in jujitsu and marksmanship—formed a human wall around the premier and his wife as they took in the sights of the Big Apple. New York rolled out the red carpet, and the Khrushchevs trod it with a stately satisfaction that rapidly gave way to finger-snapping, heel-kicking glee. As the premier boarded the plane for Los Angeles, Nina at his side, he mugged for cameras, kissed babies and shook hands so assiduously he could have been running for office.

And then the bottom fell out.

In Los Angeles, ostensibly because he was nettled at Mayor Paulson's hardline speech and because he discovered that Disneyland would not be on his itinerary, the raging, tabletop-pounding, Magyar-cowing Khrushchev came to the fore: he threw a tantrum. The people of the United States were inhospitable boors—they'd invited him to fly halfway round the world simply to abuse him. He'd had enough. He was curtailing the trip and heading back to Moscow.

I was with Ike when the first reports of the premier's explosion flashed across the TV screen. Big-bellied and truculent, Khrushchev was lecturing the nation on points of etiquette, jowls atremble, fists beating the air, while Nina, her head bowed, stood meekly at his side. Ike's voice was so pinched it could have come from a ventriloquist's dummy: "My God," he whispered, "he knows." (I suddenly remembered the car slowing, the flash of a pale face behind the darkened glass, and thought of Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, the vast network of Soviet spies operating unchecked in the land of the free: they'd seen her after all.) Shaking his head, Ike got up, crossed the room and lit another verboten cigarette. He looked weary, immeasurably old, Rip Van Winkle waking beside his rusted gun. "Well Paderewski," he sighed, a blue haze playing round the wisps of silver hair at his temples, "I guess now the

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shit's really going to hit the fan."

He was right, but only partially. To his credit, Khrushchev covered himself like a trooper—after all, how could he reveal so shocking and outrageous a business as this without losing face himself, without transforming himself in that instant from the virile, bellicose, iron-fisted ruler of the Soviet masses to a pudgy, pathetic cuckold? He allowed himself to be mollified by apologies from Paulson and Cabot Lodge over the supposed insult, posed for a photograph with Shirley MacLaine at 20th Century Fox, and then flew on to San Francisco for a tense visit. He made a dilatory stop in Iowa on his way back to Washington and the inevitable confrontation with the man who had suddenly emerged as his rival in love as well as ideology. (I'm sure you recall the celebrated photographs in *Life*, *Look* and *Newsweek*—Khrushchev leering at a phallic ear of corn, patting the belly of a crewcut interloper at the Garst farm in Iowa, hefting a piglet by the scruff of its neck. Study them today—especially in contrast to the pre-Los Angeles photos—and you'll be struck by the mixture of jealous rage and incomprehension playing across the premier's features, and the soft, tragic, downcast look in his wife's eyes.)

I sat beside the president on the way out to Camp David for the talks that would culminate the Khrushchev visit. He was subdued, desolated, the animation gone out of his voice. He'd planned for these talks as he'd planned for the European Campaign, devising stratagems and feints, studying floorplans, mapping the territory, confident he could spirit away his inamorata for an idyllic hour or two beneath the pines. Now there was no chance of it. No chance in fact that he'd ever see her again. He was slumped in his seat, his head thrown back against the bulletproof glass as if he no longer had the will to hold it up. And then—I've never seen anything so moving, so emotionally ravaging in my life—he began to cry. I offered him my handkerchief but he motioned me away, great wet heaving sobs tearing at his lungs, the riveting blue eyes that had gazed with equanimity on the most heinous scenes of devastation known to civilized man reddened with a sorrow beyond despair. "Nina," he choked, and buried his face in his hands.

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Elliott Erwitt / Magnum

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You know the rest. The "tough" talks at Camp David (ostensibly over the question of the Berlin Wall), the Soviet premier's postponement of Ike's reciprocal visit till the spring "when things are in bloom," the eventual rescinding of the invitation altogether and the virulent anti-Eisenhower speech Khrushchev delivered in the wake of the U-2 incident. Then there was Ike's final year in office, his loss of animation, his heart troubles (*heart troubles*—could anything be more ironic?), the way in which he so rapidly and visibly aged, as if each moment of each day weighed on him like an eternity. And finally, our last picture of him: the affable, slightly foggy old duffer chasing a white ball across the links as if it were some part of himself he'd misplaced.

As for myself, I was rapidly demoted after the Khrushchev visit—it almost seemed as if I were an embarrassment to Ike, and in a way I guess I was, having seen him with his defenses down and his soul laid bare. I left the government a few months thereafter and have pursued a rewarding academic career ever since, and am in fact looking forward to qualifying for tenure in the upcoming year. It has been a rich and satisfying life, one that has had its ups and downs, its years of quotidian existence and its few breathless moments at the summit of human history. Through it all, through all the myriad events I've witnessed, the loves I've known, the emotions stirred in my breast by the tragic events of our times, I can say with a sense of reverent gratitude and the deepest sincerity that nothing has so moved and tenderly astonished me as the joy, the sorrow, the epic sweep of the star-crossed love of Ike and Nina. I think of the Cold War, of nuclear proliferation, of Hungary, Korea and the U-2 incident, and it all finally pales beside this: he loved her, and she loved him.

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Harold Brodkey

Jewlove

I'll compare Jew-love to Roman light,
stone palazzi in travellers' perspectives

obelisks and domes,
and the disdain of God,

in the racing and the pouring light.
a blasphemy, as here

here, where once, whores,
coarser than Ashtareth,

braver than Saul,
sold love to cardinals

who would elect
the next proper voice of God: if love

is the government
of my life now, it is like that—

it is not a Jewboy's game
this raw song is not a psalm

I am Einstein's kin,
unlikely overseer of delirium

if I ask why in the name of God I don't pray
I know no prayers for *romance*,

no Jewish prayers
romance is not a word of the beginning:

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the barbered Tiber jerks along beneath Saint Angelo's angel
riding, that drop of bronze orgasm, in reflection

in the motions in the muddy brook, rabid baptism pool
of Europe,

among the unexpected nests, marble and ornate,
of The Bleeding God and His Virgin,

she is bowl-eyed with mercy

in stolen Rome, the rememberer;
among the bronze and marble furnitures

of two empires, I have the broad memory of a bed
of arms. Inchoate in the hotel light, see

the monstrous visage at each crotch—
liar's zero, talented Jewish tongue,

voici les deux Yiddim

more orphaned than dumblipped
Anne Boleyn and What's-his-name

who lost their heads

on bubbling harnesses of blood: the severed ligaments
that ache as after *love*, the broken, dangling

sprouting, leaking reins, the will's the race's
charioteer: so, at the end and the commencement

of Heaven—as no Jew

ought to say—the headsman's breathy grunt, the proud
mouth's orbit (of silence),

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the throat's reddened opening

the thighs' vows—the ark—heat
your eyes have an execution day's velvet,

a form of youth, Ellen; a bedroom oratory:
now the pastel hemorrhage—TV or sunset—day's ark—

opens and I take the unveiled voice, voices, lovers' whispers
to make verses of the gibbet prick fallen

into the well from my coat's pocket, the being Jew and male
and the gibbous heart hung on our true cross

blasphemously to two religions: an untrue cross,
and further Gospels,

bride of Christ and passions for the violet-eyed
not-Magdalen

who bathes the fringes and the corpus in mirroring devotion
with stars torn in a pout of fingertips

in unDavidic triangles, the interlocked geometries of discourse,
the intercourse of the blessed, or the chosen, or lucky

now as she starts to kiss the male Papal slut, he mounts
the woman heretic; the nether chants, the ascendant sacrament

do not quote from English letters—as for the French
the mail is handsome on my handsome Jewish legs

the winding joy of these acrobatics
I say the romaunt of the old red flower, blossoming cunt,

failed to modify lovemaking's stink,
the famous stench of Ninon or Montespan

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mad pots of odor beneath each arm,
stew pans of smell between our legs

the mad expelled talk and gasp of the uncongregationed
comprehending how knots are pardoned into release

so my waist, my back, my legs make do as clocks,
since time's clock is lunatic

from TV and movies comes the foam
for the birth of Levitican Aphrodite,

one for the Jews, foam-and-cloud-born for this Jew,
old wrathful, languorous woman, thick with goddess flesh,

bright-assed, great-haunched in the foam—such white
music: Hellene divinity, sans fear, sans blood—eyes entirely

without human fear—foam-colored in ocean light, sunlit
in Delos, dove-bedecked, God's pagan harlotry defined

as a pearl of flesh, rouged pearl
and ornamental hair, pink mother, Aphrodite

and her fat, error-mad son, winged infant triggering
the terse blows of arrowing light, the rough gaieties

here ignore love's moratorium on hunger and old debts
and such terms of usury and charity

and contemplate how little their own temperament and air
have to do with our two Jews

the enamored Hebes who are terms in formulation
in the particular stillness of the unspeakably personal.

I know speech with this woman as echo and memory
without literature. In the delicate stationing

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and sentrywait of some moments in the secrecy
behind the light, between our actions, I observe

below the doing of low errands—uncaged crows,
the murderer's majesty in the paralysed arc

of the red-shouldered hawk as it hunts the frightened blood,
small creatures of the stubble

in the burst and slide of observed fields
between death and somewhere else

a vertigo, a culture, such a task: this job
is for a lover, lovesick angry revisions

of the movies' provisional lies although
I can testify she has hoity-toity eyes, a changeling's

mind: often a torn face; she has small bones, small hands
—why don't you smile at us—she has a torn face—Ariadne

and her Jewish thread—oh staring eyes surround
us at the instant of return,

I want to say here is a fragment of the goddess
here in ripely lit streets, mystery has returned

to mystery—Tourists! Citizens! who will bless our nerve,
nameless Jews, deracinated and in Laocoön postures

erotic vagrancy; guilty of attachment, loneliness mocked
in airless tendrils of attachment, shadows stretched with wind

move us like sails—I see the colonnade
of her arms

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on either side of the mad piazza
if of her breasts below St. Peter's

the forehead of the world, the world's soul within—
a Jew says this—I cry out in a tourist's tongue, a dream

speech with outcries in it, the homeless magnitude of souls
are a clutter in the emotions

the homely shout that ends in the nightsky, and
in the nightsky, the clutter in GREAT STILLNESS

overshines these streets in their paint of pale light
at some other hour when the pale crazed sickle moons

of noise arise of those busy in the unChristly mess
of Christly trafficking in sin—unJewish is this doctrine—

my eyes darken each point, each thorn edge, in the eclipse
that is an embrace, our royally elaborate breasts are bare

and at innumerable sites we are not citizens,
Jew-Ovid and his Hebrew whore, a duo

wrapped in happenstance
and in the constant use of each other's extorted name

an animal silence
an as if holy history

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Art History (from an only moderately good translation)

Allan Gurganus

In the shady northeast corner of the park, where vines have overcome the water fountains, and evergreens grow, rangy and unkempt as in the depths of Vronsky Forest, I came upon two children doing something very naughty. I had wandered to this most rustic corner of the Common seeking quietude and relief from the dogs recently permitted by a foolish ordinance to run free without leashes in the park. Their barking had annoyed me, a man of modest but fixed habits, and I strolled in this new direction.

I turned onto a footpath between fir trees. A terra-cotta sculpture stood there, its color, soapy and golden: Cupid, mounted on a marble block little taller than I. The children had just scrambled up onto the pedestal. One broken branch of the spruce beside it still swung back and forth. I stopped, appalled at what these urchins were already doing. Cupid's weight rested poised upon one tiptoe. The other chubby leg swung behind him in the illusion of flight and forward motion. The girl squatted underneath the sculpture, hooking her thin

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arm over its uplifted leg. She laughed, calling for the boy to watch, then pulled matted hair back from her forehead, craned her neck, and began licking at the statue's bulbous little underparts. I stood there, astonished.

In the rosy light that fell across the sculpture at this hour, her head moved like a suckling calf's. The boy locked arms around the Cupid's neck, and shouted something I did not understand. He then eased his weight back between the two arched wings and hung there, as from a bicycle. I saw that he had pulled his plaid shorts down. Now, swinging forward, he wrapped skinny legs around the statue's hips and began rutting vigorously at the plump sculpted buttocks. In street argot, he called obscenely to the girl. She leaned beyond the terra-cotta belly, squinted up at him, gave a sharp cynical laugh.

With a slight breeze, the sun intensified. I was startled at how long I had watched all this, and with what detachment. I told myself, these are not simians climbing about their artificial island at the National Zoo; these are human beings defiling a human monument. My abdomen registered a tremor: nausea and some preposterous sexual desire. Gripping the paper, I saw how sweat had smudged the evening news across my palm. I could not bear to look at the Cupid again, but turned and hurried to the concession booth where a policeman had been chatting with the boy behind the counter. As I passed the fountain, I saw the uniform, still there. I approached and observed the officer bent into the booth, examining a medal around the neck of the concessioner. I asked the policeman to come with me at once. I was afraid to tell what I had seen. I requested that he please follow me quickly. Others there, twin brothers with bottled lemonade, a plain girl eating an apple, stared at my face, my clothing. The gypsy boy behind the counter toyed with the gold medallion at his throat and smirked oddly at me. I beckoned the officer along a brick path, beyond the broken fountain, four stranded bronze swans, an apple core set cruelly upon the head of one. A nurse watched me lead the policeman. I felt like Charlie Chaplin followed by an enormous constable. I hoped none of my pupils or colleagues might chance past. I was already pointing toward the Cupid when it came into view

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beyond the spruce. The children were gone.

The sun had moved higher on the statue so only its head and wings now showed golden in the light. "They have run away," I said and walked forward, feeling ridiculous. I had to be certain and, standing on my tiptoes, I pressed fingers to the genitals, still darker than the rest, and damp. At least I knew. The policeman stood beside me, watching my examination of the Cupid.

"Perhaps," I stammered, settling back onto both heels, "I will not bother you with what I just saw at this spot." He laughed once, good-naturedly, and easing me back against the marble pedestal, continued grinning as he reached down and gently cupped his hand between my legs.

Since Mother's death, my father has become a great heartache. Soon after she died of food poisoning on a seaside outing, it was announced that Father would be retired from the Lycée where he had taught since I was born. This puzzled my husband and me. Father had always been well-liked at the school. When I was a child, he invited the poorer boys to our house on holidays. He was an athletic gentleman and played sports with them on the mowed sideyard. He devised complicated scavenger hunts which lasted until evening. I would sometimes help wrap the little presents he gave them. He wrote out each boy's full name in his beautiful old-fashioned script. Often he copied down mine and let me keep the slip of paper.

I sent Ernest, my husband, to investigate Father's dismissal. When Ernest came home, he looked in through the doorway, shaking his head in disgust. He said that Father had been fortunate, being dismissed so quietly. My own father, Ernest told me bitterly, had taken boys from the school to a hotel room on a holiday trip to the seaside. Their parents believed the Lycée sponsored this outing. Afterwards, one boy reported my father's misconduct. When this happened, others came forward to confess. How I cried when Ernest told me this so coldly! How this soured all memories of Father tussling with the boys on our sideyard in those perfect early evenings!

Watching such a game through the cottage window, Mother

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once wept. "Oh," she sobbed, stroking the cat, Mitzi, who always slept there in the windowsill beside the potted geraniums and herbs, "you should have a little brother, Hedwig. How your father needs a real son."

She pressed the long embroidered apron to her face. I reached for her skirt and leaned my forehead against her strong leg.

After his forced retirement, Father again concentrated on his book, a work of art history he had been rewriting since I was a baby. Ernest and I had hoped he would be happy. He owned the cottage, a small pension and the remains of Mother's land, the yearly rents from her two dairy farms in the South.

Three evenings ago, I read in the newspaper of my own father's arrest. He had not called or notified us. Ernest says that shame was the reason for this. One paper printed Father's photograph, an out-of-date portrait from his brilliant days at University. The trial is next week. Ernest says I must not go, but, of course, I shall.

I am only glad my mother never lived to see so respected a gentleman fall to such public disgrace. His book was with a publishing company. Ernest says they will not print it now.

The mother of one boy my father took to the ocean resort wrote me a terrible letter. Ernest read it, then tore it up before I ever saw it. He will not tell me what it was about. He only says he understands why a mother wronged in this way would write such dreadful things. Every hour of the day, I am ashamed.

The defendant approached me in front of the concession stand at Ney Park late that afternoon. He seemed distressed and asked me to accompany him. He was a distinguished-looking older gentleman and I thought perhaps an elderly companion of his had fallen or was sick somewhere in the park. This had happened to me last summer; an old woman said nothing but signaled me to follow and there her friend was, holding her hat, crying beside a bush, her hip broken. I asked no questions of the defendant but followed him to the northeastern edge of the park, the corner near the War Memorial. He led me down a narrow path between trees to a statue of a baby angel. Once

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there, he said we were now alone. He stood on his tiptoes and touched the private parts of the baby angel. Then he held his hand up to the light and examined his fingers. He smiled slightly, turning to face me. It was at this moment that he leaned against the base of the statue, seized my right hand and pulled it over against his privates. As a result, I then arrested him.

"Your grandsons?" the desk clerk asked, smiling sentimentally. "Oh yes," I lied to simplify matters, "an outing with them." I signed my last name and their firsts. The boys, each holding a small pasteboard suitcase, stood across the lobby near the French doors. Felix quietly read aloud the Latin names of shells. Both boys' legs were edged with light, the down—ankle to upper thigh—glowed, an incandescent fringe. Their long shadows angled across the marble parquetry to where the desk clerk and I stood watching. My students were suffused, without seeming to notice, in a pink and golden light as pure as the vivid glazes on the conch shell they now held between them. They listened intently, both their heads tilted toward it, as to a phone receiver.

"Karl. Felix," I called them. Karl carefully replaced the shell and they both came quickly over. Neither had ever stayed at a hotel before. Both were observant, obedient children. The desk clerk smiled sadly, admiring them. "Sir, I envy you," he said, "being, as I am myself, a bachelor and getting older." I gave him a coin, took up my satchel, then led the boys to a small lift. The three of us crowded into the wrought-iron cage, ascending.

After they had tested all the plumbing, after every dresser drawer had been checked, after samples of the hotel stationery and soap had been packed away for their parents and sisters, the boys stretched out on the big beds. Felix yawned once and flexed his long pale arms.

"Before you both fall asleep listening to the ocean, is it not time to bathe?" I asked.

"Yes, before supper," Karl said and, standing in his socks, bouncing on the old bed, he pulled the shirt over his head and

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tossed it down at Felix who was feigning sleep. What good boys, I thought, remembering some chocolate I had bought for them at the train depot. Hoping it had not melted, I unbuckled my bag. Karl stepped off the bed and, now wearing only his white undershorts, opened the glass doors of the balcony and walked out into the breeze. The long lace curtains rose from the floor, lifted straight into the room, then bellied out and drooped, first one then the other, settling as in sighs upon Karl's bed. He stood leaning over the grillwork of the balcony, pointing to a freighter trailing orange smoke across the horizon of violently streaked pastels.

"Karl," Felix called through the opened doors, "do you like the bathwater very hot, or in between?"

This pleased me, made me smile. I unfastened my valise and fumbled around inside for the candy. It had warmed and, in the gold foil wrapper, felt quite pliant.

"And did he," the headmaster leaned into the brilliance of the one desk lamp, daubing his forehead with a folded handkerchief, "offer any rewards if you would...cooperate and keep silent?"

"Chocolate," the boy replied, looking down at the blond hair on his forearm, "chocolate and a copy of that statue, the statue in Brussels of the small boy urinating. And a seashell, he bought each of us a conch shell at the shop in the train station."

"I see," the headmaster said, pulling his shirt cuffs out of the sleeves of his jacket and standing all in one gesture as if his whole body were spans, tabs and joints of crisp overstarched linen. With a curt nod, he repeated, "Thank you. You have acted wisely to tell us this." The boy bowed and left. The office door snapped closed, then the latch of the antechamber was heard.

Pinching the creases of his trousers into proper alignment, the headmaster eased down onto the edge of the desktop. He then unfastened his stiff shirt front and, snatching handkerchief from jacket pocket, reached in and violently daubed each armpit. He slapped delicately at his pale chest as if powdering

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it, all while envisioning the gentleman in question wheezing around a cheap hotel room, like a satyr in pursuit of two thin boys, giggling and dripping wet. The headmaster, drying neck and forehead, imagined the ocean, thunderous then silent then thunderous again outside, as the gentleman eased across the floral carpet on his knees, toward the corner where the smiling panting boys had stopped at last. Sliding toward them, the man balanced a silver tray on either palm. The seashells rattled, wobbling against their own pink reflected undersides; the brass statuettes stared down at themselves upended; there seemed exactly twice as much milk chocolate. The boys watched, interested, as the trinkets wobbled closer. Shivering slightly, droplets from the interrupted bath eased over each visible rib and down their long brown legs. Chocolate, a statuette, a seashell. A set for you, and a set for you. For years and very quietly, giving boy after boy these inexpensive, appreciated gifts. Chocolate, a statuette, a seashell.

The headmaster bit down on his folded handkerchief, then bit again.

As a cellmate they have assigned me a burglar, a would-be jewel thief. He has a connoisseur's love of gems, a child's idea of how to steal them. He is agile, blond, haplessly corrupted, seventeen years old. His mind is tender and lurid as his scar. This mark begins at the center of his throat, twists up one side of his face, and narrows to a crescent which falls just short of hooking his childish mouth. Its almost perfect C-shape connects an adult's throat to the indolent choirboy mouth. His scar complicates and redeems his commonplace good looks. When he is feverish or angry, I see the mark grow crimson, scarlet, actually. Like a thermometer, it colors from the bottom upward.

He bathes himself with great care, with a jewel thief's intelligent fingers. I lie on the bottom bunk, hands behind head, watching him. There is nothing else to look at in this cell and my staring seems acceptable. As he bathes, he whistles quite beautifully, warbling popular songs through his front teeth. In sunlight from the barred window he soaps himself vigorously. Sections of his lathered back gleam in stripes. He whistles

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accompaniment of chirps and complicated trills. Holding his long arms straight out, one at a time, he rubs soap along them. I glimpse the sheen and smooth translucence of certain marble Pietas. His ribs, under tight shifting skin, curve one way while lines of sun fall in quite another so, as he moves, these stripes smoothly chafe each other. They make a criss-crossing matrix as with plaids or basketry. I see his whole torso light up, a radiant sieve.

In prison, I am trying to teach myself factual thinking. I am comforted in recalling how once at University, for a final examination, the great art historian, K. Blenheim, strode into the conference room where we, his favorite class, sat waiting. On the central revolving pedestal, he placed a homely object.

"Gentlemen," he said, "please describe this. Leave your test booklets here when you are done. I have enjoyed associating with you for these three years."

He turned and left; an outside door slammed, echoed down the hallway. We looked at one another, then the object, then again at one another. It was a copper float, part of a toilet's workings. Ovoid, little larger than an orange, a serrated seam bound its center. During our three years of intense work with him, Blenheim had daily placed different sorts of relics on this pedestal: Persian enamels, a small, beautifully preserved Greek vase, an eighteenth-century miniature of an English squire's favorite spaniel, an Egyptian footstool. Now, several of my classmates, some of the most brilliant, pushed back their chairs, creased their examination booklets, and wandered out, singly and in groups, some muttering, most silent.

"Art History?" a thin, moustached young man called bitterly over his shoulder, "the history of art?" Others stayed seated, giggling. As I watched, the boy beside me massaged the thin bridge of his nose and laughed quietly, eyes pressed shut. "Three years of my life," he whispered to himself. Still another fellow broke his pencil, once then twice. He cupped the pieces in his fist, rattling these like dice as he left.

Some of us still sat there looking at the pedestal and the toilet fixture. From the street came sounds of morning traffic, a man selling newspapers. Finally I opened my test booklet. I simply tried to describe the thing. As Blenheim had taught us, in his reedy rational voice, I energetically looked and looked at

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it. I mentioned no implied plumbing. I did not assume that this was part of anything larger, mechanically or historically. I treated it as an object whole unto itself, and not without certain peculiar beauties all its own.

In just this way, in this unlikely setting, I now try to see myself.

Before sleep, I exercise my memory, recalling seating charts of favorite classes I taught at the Lycée. From these I lift my choice of thirty years of boys. All that character, all those eyes. I place each child at his original desk. When I finally survey this composite class of best-loved pupils, I am amused to sometimes find two or even three boys from different years, whole different generations, now stacked, smiling, all one age, in the same deskchair. I imagine my cellmate seated there in the front row, not wearing a school uniform like the others, not in his coarse prison garb, but instead luminous and shirtless, and—I note—shiny, still soapy from some bath. There are no books, penstaffs before him. Only jewels on his desktop, a great mound of them glittering as in a child's tale of treasure. The gems refract the morning classroom's sunlight; they cast prismatic shapes on floor and ceiling. Purest spectral hues dance all across the room. A winking angle comes and goes above the murky lithograph of Goethe. One corner of the green aquarium is spotlit and clouds of emerald algae, glints of fish, drift through it.

The wall map of America is flecked with coin-sized lozenges like ghostly hints at coming capitals or miracles or future battles with Red Indians. And, seated at the center of this blurry constellation, my latest favorite shines, the gems' light rests upon his glossy chest, the chin, his garnet scar. Suddenly, he lifts the jewels like an armful of harvest or sea life and our classroom is tattooed with rainbow stripes, tremulous octagons and arcs. Other students laugh and dip their hands into these pools of light. They start to sing, in three-part harmony, one song I taught them all in different years. My cellmate holds treasure out to me, and voices of my best-loved children tremble up into a sweet assured crescendo. Decades of favorites, a class of masterpieces, comrades, all harmonious.

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John Peck

from "Hours Near the Crossing"

Glass breaking and then laughter
under the open window—
a rabble of carousers
drains through the night, blotted
quickly, although still
trickles of their abandon
silver the great cave:
this is a taste longer
than echo. And their strength
is to drink quickly, hear
only their jangle strike,
tinkling day into blank—
the slaves of Tigellinus
smashing a flagon, young
fascists, and not so young,
in brotherly numbness.
Their bar lies two streets over.
And dumbly I drift out
on that sound when I meant
only to listen further,
go while my body darkens
at the cool window, out
where the night weave tatters through—

blacker bitch of the crossroads,
moon in your tooth and hearth
in the smoky geometry
of your throat, from a whelp
we have known you and yet
only in the weight
of our having done nothing well
do you press home.
The men

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vanishing down there, being
your brats, draw to your pelt
like iron-filings, smoothing
to your vast underbelly.
But I too feel the suction,
the night is too much yours.

Closing my eyes I slowly
bring back the afternoon,
courtyard and plug stone well
where a finch without splashing
dove from one side to slice
that blue, his font and mine
in a pact too immediate
to revoke now.
And strength not to be claimed,
strength of the keen forerunners
unrepeatable, all
poured out, itself the air
burning over burnt hills,
while the bowl of clear fire
remains to be walked into.
At each step remains.
Little knots of people
taking cleared ground above
the city inch through strength
poured out and trembling and
unseizable.
It need not
have been wrong to be strenuous
though inadequate.
A bald man
tumbles awake from his roof-chair
where the heat ripples him,
disciple gaping up
at swarms of shape—perhaps now
he'll hear the command fashioned
to his one need: *Kill and eat!*

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It need not have been wrong.
And one life. Little cracks
life itself will take care of
widening. I need no poker
to find that seam where the ember
breaks open to burn brighter.

*

Pebble into air,
and the boy's hand cupped upward
and death not yet mature
running after.
Birth with sun
pouring, and in the square
the common bread lies scattered,
eaten in urgency,
stupor, or a blithe
unconcern for what comes.
Nocturnals into day,
a full weave not forgotten
but not sung through, the whole
singing not wholly woven.
Death with us.
And the mongrel
sure of his rounds trots past
with his morsel, delegating
care to the willing.
Listen,
the sound of harpers striking up
in places where the women
draw water. . . .

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Portfolio

Photographs

Barbara Kruger

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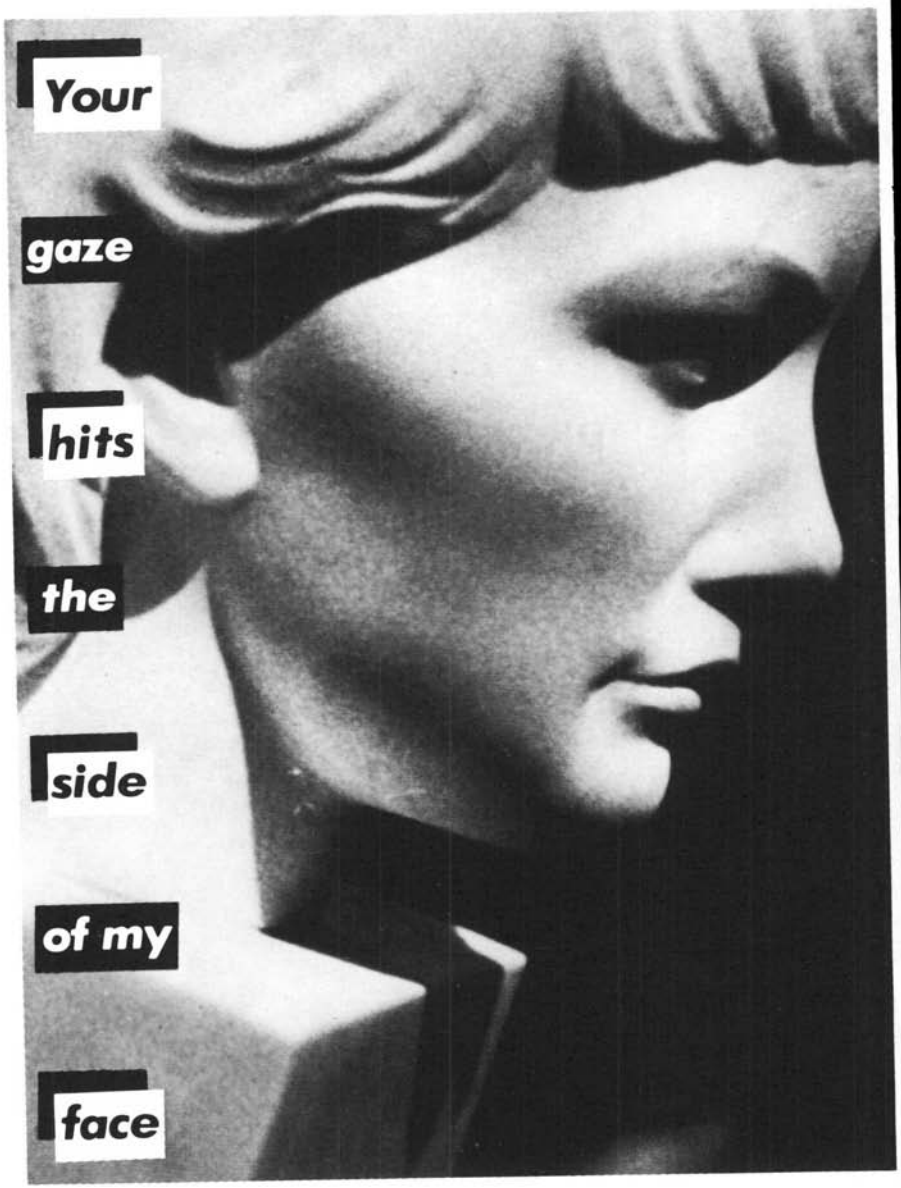

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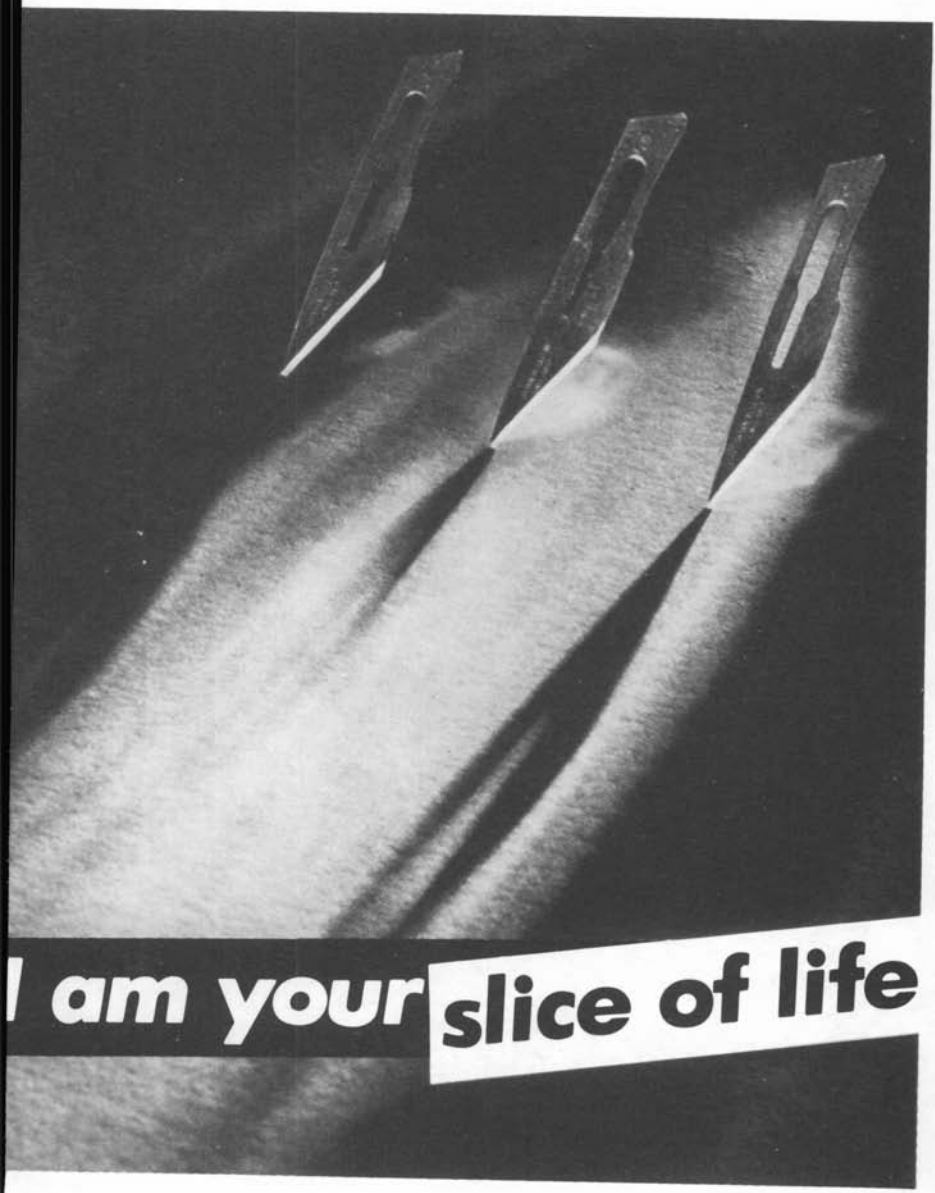

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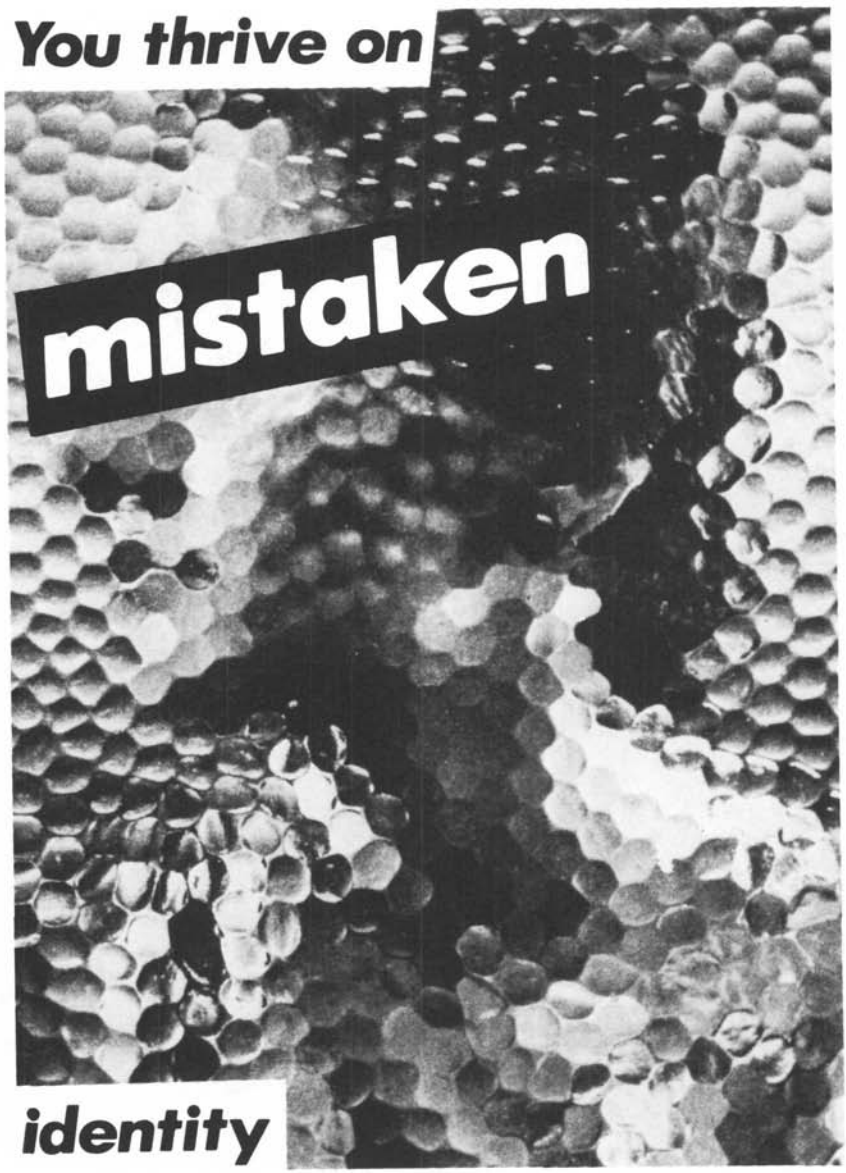

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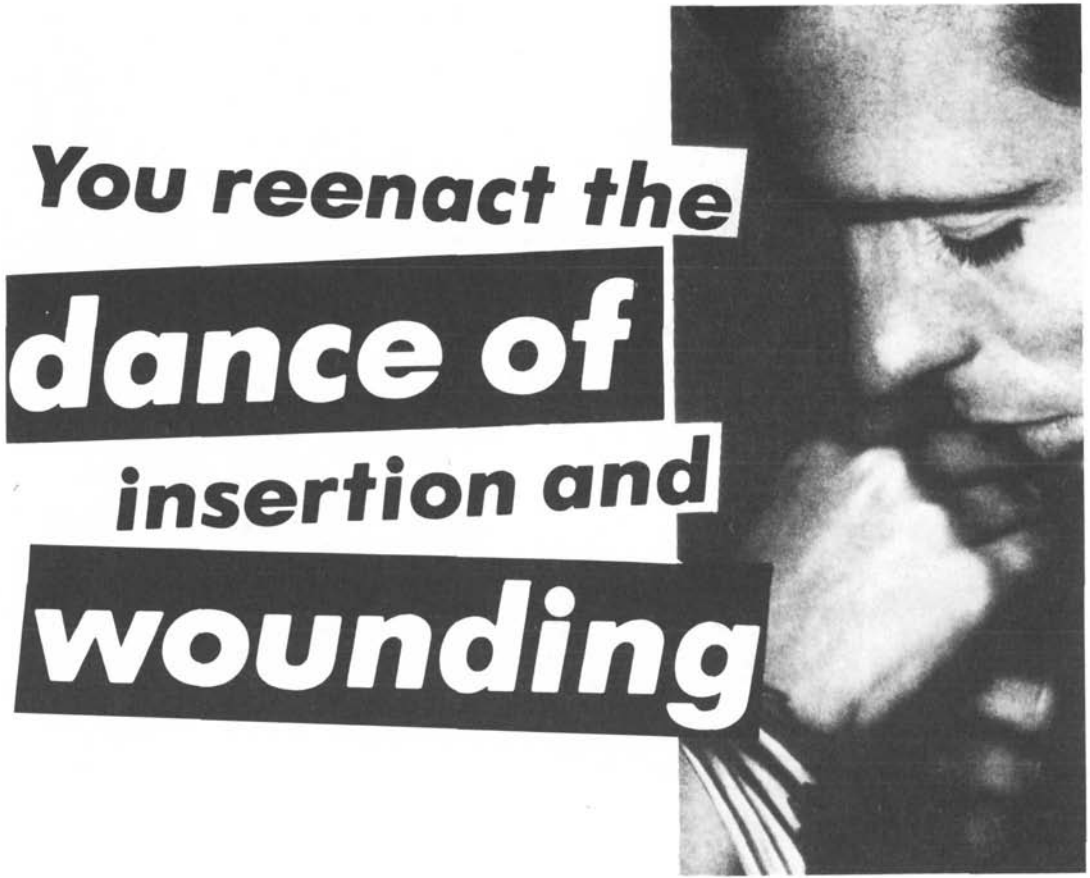

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MOTHER AND SON

My mother died in Pittsburgh on the evening of Thanksgiving Day, that is, on November 25, 1937. If she had lived three weeks longer she would have been 73.

She died in the Wallace Building, three stories of grimy yellow brick in the commercial center of the district known as East Liberty. Even late at night streetcars grumbled past two sides of the building. It had shops on the ground floor, some of them expensive, though even these had taken to changing owners. The upper stories contained a few cramped apartments, like ours, but were mostly occupied by music teachers--voice, piano, violin--and by a few unprosperous physicians who lived next to their offices. Every two or three years there was a fire in the building, but it was always brought under control. During one fire Mother stood shivering in the street beside my father and watched firemen playing their hoses on the roof. "Oh, Doctor," she said, "I forgot to empty the pan under the icebox." She emptied the pan next morning when they went back to the apartment and found it not much damaged except by smoke.

She had lived in the Wallace Building since it was spanking new and she was a bride. She died there in a little room lined ceiling-high with my father's books, which she never opened, and dimly lighted by an airshaft. She died of a heart illness that, in its acute form, had lasted a little more than three weeks, although it went back to another attack two years before, when, as always, she was spending the summer in the country. That first attack would have killed an ordinary woman, but Mother had brought herself through it by her pure determination to live. In her extreme pain she had sometimes moaned "Mamma, Mamma," as if begging for solace

First page of a Cowley autobiographical piece entitled Mother and Son.

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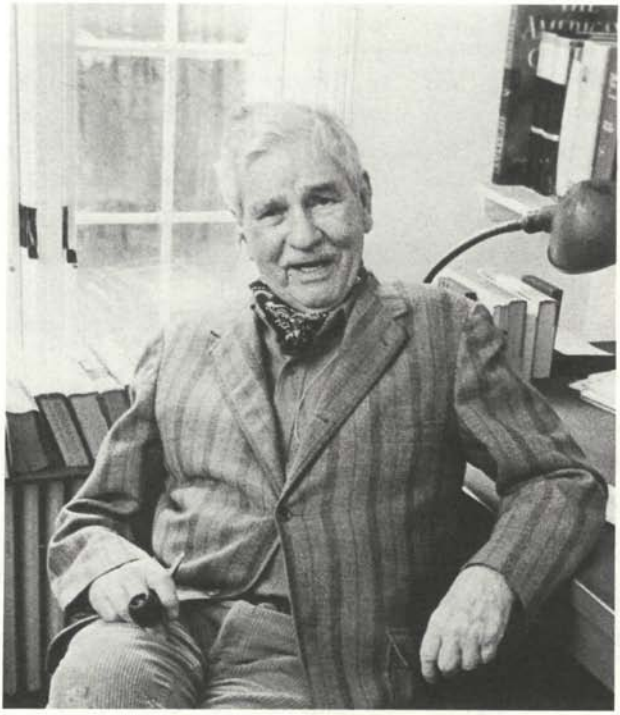

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The Art of Fiction LXX
Malcolm Cowley

This interview was conducted in two places dear to Malcolm Cowley, and which suggest the two main areas of his literary life. One conversation took place in the Harvard Club's Card Room, a cubbyhole in the New York club's upstairs warrens. Cowley often lunches at the club on the days when he comes into New York from his Connecticut home to perform his editing duties at the Viking Press. Although Cowley refers to himself only as a writer in his Who's Who *biographical data, he enjoys a great reputation as an editor and critic—especially for a championing of William Faulkner in the late 40s which was largely responsible for the renewed interest in the author.*

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Second talks were held at Cowley's Connecticut home where he is freer to do his own writing. His most notable books include his collection of poetry, Blue Juniata, Exile's Return, The Dry Season, The Literary Situation, The Faulkner-Cowley File, A Second Flowering, *and* I Worked at the Writer's Trade.

Cowley has twice been President of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and Chancellor of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His demeanor these days (he is 84) suggests that he could take up these tasks again with ease. His manner is brisk, his voice hearty. He wears a hearing aid, but that is his only visible concession to his years.

Thomas H. Guinzburg, who was Cowley's former publisher and employer at the Viking Press, wrote the following upon reading this interview: "...fellow readers will gain the strong impression Cowley is determined to resist the constant invasions of his time. Do not believe him. Malcolm has always given ample time to any of us who were perceptive enough to seek it, frequently delaying his own more valuable projects in the process. Cowley missed the golden pay day when editors suddenly became stars and found themselves negotiating their *names onto book jackets and title pages. Nor did he ever adopt the 'New York' scene. He and his wife, Muriel, continue to live and work in Sherman, Connecticut, and from his one-man assembly line there continues to pour out our most accurate impressions of the life and times of American twentieth-century writing and publishing."*

INTERVIEWERS

How would you compare the lot of writers today with when you started?

COWLEY

In many ways things are easier now for writers. Sixty years ago there were no such things as writing fellowships; there were no Guggenheims...very few prizes. There were almost no teaching posts for writers. So the would-be writers came to New York

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and tried to get a job on a newspaper. Usually they ended up in an advertising agency, or they starved in the Village. Free-lance work was paid for at the rate of about a penny a word for reviews. *The New Republic* and *The Dial* paid two cents; that was high, and besides, you were always glad to be printed in those magazines.

The only chance for higher pay was with fiction, in the glossies. These had enormous circulations for that time, and they were paying good rates for fiction. *The Saturday Evening Post* went up to $4000 per story with F. Scott Fitzgerald, and I don't think that was absolutely their top rate. A couple of other writers earned up to $50,000 every year writing short stories. Fiction was the field and remained so until the disappearance of the family magazine in the 30's and 40's, one after the other going, until now it is the devil's own job to get fiction published, even for people who are very good at it. But still, by and large, the writer has an easier time of it than a few decades ago.

INTERVIEWERS

What about the poets?

COWLEY

There's been an enormous change. As late as 1930 there were only a few men and women who supported themselves as poets. One was Robert Frost and another was Oscar Hammerstein II. We had great respect for e.e. cummings because he lived as a poet, but even he got a little money from his mother. T.S. Eliot was a bank clerk, and then worked with Faber & Faber, the publishers. Robert Frost managed to support himself after *North of Boston* by readings, and by lecturing at universities. He rather blazed a trail in that respect. Now, a lot of poets are poets primarily. Many of them may teach or read their poetry to keep up, but probably two or three hundred people in the United States if asked their trade would say "poet."

INTERVIEWERS

Do you regret not having concentrated more fully on your poetry?

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COWLEY

Yes, I have regretted it very much. The shift, for me, was the essential middle-class feeling that I had to support myself.

INTERVIEWERS

What were you paid for *Blue Juniata*?

COWLEY

I got an advance of $125 and no further payments.

INTERVIEWERS

That was why you didn't go on?

COWLEY

I wanted to go on writing poetry, but I always had the feeling that I couldn't write any poem that didn't come to me. I didn't say to myself, "Go spend two hours and write a poem." Perhaps I should have. Of course, if I'd had a few more dollars I would have written more poetry. Book reviewing didn't help. Odd: being an editor didn't interfere with my writing; it was being an editor *and* a book-reviewer. You find that you put everything you've got into anything you write. There may not be so much left over.

INTERVIEWERS

There are many excuses for not writing.

COWLEY

Pipes are one of the best. I can use one even to keep from talking. And there's always a letter to be written. One of the great penalties of having been around for a long time is that there is hardly a genuine letter in the mail I receive. It's rare that one of my letters isn't a request for information about somebody on whom the requester is doing a dissertation. Jesus! Well, at least I don't have Edmund Wilson's great arrogance of sending back a printed card saying that he won't do it. I do reply. I generally refer them to other sources.

INTERVIEWERS

You're probably considered a soft touch.

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COWLEY

I keep hoping I'll be compensated in some way. Once I wrote a piece that tried to sum up the joys and vexations of being eighty, but I left out one of the worst vexations—which is to become a national scholarly resource. I never expected to become a national scholarly resource—but you can't escape the destiny of your dotage. Simply by having outlived your great contemporaries, you find that you have a field all to yourself; or if you don't have a field, at least you have a stable in one corner of the field. Hundreds of scholars then come into the field who are writing dissertations, monographs, biographies—all sorts of things—and for each one they want to have a little reinforcement, a little supplement; they want to have a word straight from the horse's mouth. So they come to me and say, "Well, you are the horse—won't you please share your memories? Won't you please answer this little questionnaire of five single-spaced typed pages?" or, "Won't you let us put your memories on tape?" There is no enrichment from this sort of thing. Not one of them thinks of filling the horse's feedbox with oats or of putting a little hay in the manger. They assume, I guess, that a horse can just forage for himself—if he has time; certainly nobody gives him an offer to earn an easy living by putting himself out to stud.

INTERVIEWERS

You're making us feel guilty. Do you mind if we ask you about Gertrude Stein's remark, "You are all a lost generation"?

COWLEY

Oh, it's simple as all get-out. Gertrude Stein was having her Model-T Ford repaired at a garage in the south of France. The mechanics weren't very good; they weren't on the job—in fact, I think they were on strike. The proprietor said to Miss Stein, "These young men are no good—they are all a lost generation"—*une génération perdue.* So an unknown French garage man should get credit for that remark. Of course, Miss Stein deserves credit for picking up on the phrase.

INTERVIEWERS

Is it possible the garage man was referring to "a lost

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generator''?

COWLEY

Her French was better than that.

INTERVIEWERS

Was there a special sense, a feeling, about being an artist, or writer at that time?

COWLEY

The writers had an odd advantage in being born around 1900. The century had turned, so as they grew older they began to feel that it was their century—new, unprecedented. This doesn't mean that they all thought they were wonderful people, but they did think that their lives represented the fate of the new world, no less. That feeling is very strong in Scott Fitzgerald, for example, and in other writers, too; there's something of it in Dos Passos and cummings.

INTERVIEWERS

What were some of the English-speaking magazines in Europe when you arrived?

COWLEY

The first one that I ran into in Paris was *Gargoyle*, edited by two characters from Greenwich Village, Arthur Moss and Florence Gilliam. Then, in 1921, Gorham D. Munson and Matthew Josephson arrived, and they got out *Secession*. Matty became a friend of the French Dadaists; he was wonderful at making acquaintances. Next he got a job on *Broom*, which Harold Loeb had started and published in Rome; then, with Matty as managing editor, the magazine moved to Berlin, where everything was fabulously cheap. Matty had a salary of one hundred dollars per month, for which he had a triplex apartment and riding lessons for his wife.

After that came the other magazines. The great Paris magazine was Eugene Jolas's *Transition*. There was an extremely vivid sense that a new type of writing was coming along. Some-

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thing had to change after the war that had shaken civilization; here were all these people who regarded the older magazines as stuffy, commercial, not giving a voice to younger people. So the magazines were started partly with the idea that a new generation was coming onto the scene, and that they should have periodicals that spoke for them and introduced new talents. Ernest Walsh did that in *This Quarter*. Ford Madox Ford started *The Transatlantic Review* and was very much interested in the younger Americans.

INTERVIEWERS

Did you ever see Pound in Paris?

COWLEY

I went to see him a couple of times, but I was a little uneasy with him. Pound always had some new discovery or enthusiasm; he was always finding the lowdown on something. On one of my visits to his little apartment, he announced loudly, "I've got the lowdown on the Elizabethan drama! It was all cribbed from these books," and he carried out two huge volumes of the Venetian State Papers. Well, it *was* a real discovery: the plots of several Elizabethan plays *did* come out of the Venetian State Papers.

INTERVIEWERS

Why did Hemingway have such an apparent dislike for Ford Madox Ford?

COWLEY

Hemingway had the bad habit of never forgiving anyone for giving him a hand up. That may have been the problem between them. Ford was a character; he was a liar, not for his own profit, but just because he had a very faint hold on actuality. He told beautiful stories of English literary life, in which he knew everybody, had a hand in everything, and his hand grew larger as he told the story. He had a roving eye for younger women, whom he especially liked to fascinate. he came to this country after the breakup of his marriage to Stella Bowen. I

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can remember on one occasion he came up to Robber Rocks—a place back in the woods near the New York-Connecticut line which was the country headquarters for Allen Tate, Hart Crane, and others—where a lot of young wives were around at the party. They would be fondled by Ford, and then escape him up the stairs. Ford, heavy and wheezing by that time, would follow them to the head of the narrow stairs, and the door would close in his face. He would wheeze back down, and a while later he'd follow another young woman until she took refuge behind a locked door.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you think collecting in such colonies is of value to a writer? It doesn't seem to be done as much these days.

COWLEY

Perhaps that is true. But I think young writers always collect, and that is a good thing, because the persons they learn from, their real professors, are other writers of the same age. That particular neighborhood, near Robber Rocks, was cheap. The Rocks was owned by Slater Brown, but others rented rooms from a woman called Aunt Addie Turner, who lived in a great barn of a house that had once been a boys' school. She rented out parts of it for eight dollars a month. A few miles over the Connecticut line was another group—Josephine Herbst, John Hermann, Nathan Asch, and a couple of others.

INTERVIEWERS

What sort of a boarder was Hart Crane?

COWLEY

He was rather difficult. You forgave Hart a great deal because he was so kind and helpful. But then he'd get drunk and start throwing furniture out of the window. Or he'd stagger around the house with a lighted kerosene lamp.

INTERVIEWERS

I take it that for him alcohol acted as a stimulus to the cre-

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ative process?

COWLEY

One of the reasons why Hart, and many writers, turn into alcoholics is that early in their lives they find that getting drunk is part of the creative process, that it opens up visions. It's a terrible sort of creative device, because three out of four who involve themselves in it become alcoholics. But it does open up doors in the beginning. Hart Crane would even make a first draft when he was drunk; he'd come out and read it, and say, "Isn't this the greatest poem ever written?" It wasn't. But then he would work over it patiently, dead sober, for several weeks, and it would amount to something. Not the greatest poem ever written, but still extraordinary.

INTERVIEWERS

Did Crane get any help from his family?

COWLEY

Hart's father had been quite wealthy until 1929. He invented the Lifesaver-candy with a hole in it. "Crane's Chocolates" used to advertise in *The Saturday Evening Post*. But Hart was estranged from his father after his parents were divorced. The father remarried after the Crash and started a quite fashionable country restaurant named Canary Cottage in Chagrin Falls, outside of Cleveland. Still, he couldn't have helped Hart much.

INTERVIEWERS

Did Faulkner write under the influence of alcohol?

COWLEY

I rather think he did in his early years. He always hesitated to admit it, but I'm sure that a good many of his things were written when he'd been drinking. It didn't break him. And he did an extraordinary amount of revision, but he would try to preserve the integrity of that original vision, so that his rewriting was not so much line for line as it was shifting episodes and

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characters.

INTERVIEWERS

What did his manuscript pages look like? Did he make many corrections on the galleys?

COWLEY

He made them in the case of one book, *Sanctuary*. Otherwise his corrections were usually made in typescripts.

INTERVIEWERS

Writers so often complain about the horrors of writing.

COWLEY

Almost all of them are certainly procrastinators, but a few people really like to write. Kay Boyle used to say that she loved the smell of paper. Anthony Trollope trained himself to turn out forty-nine pages of manuscript a week, seven pages a day, and he was so rigorous about keeping to that exact number of pages that if he finished a novel halfway through the last day, he'd write the title of a new book and "Chapter One" on the next page and go right on until he'd done his proper quota of seven pages.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you think American writers are more prone to procrastinate than British writers?

COWLEY

American authors are more self-conscious than the British . . . a little more preoccupied with what the critics will say. The writer's problem is largely one of self-esteem. He thinks, "Is what I am writing worthy of the picture I have formed of my talent?" A lot of writers have only one book in them. Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*—then she never even tried to write another book. A lot of writers keep publishing what are essentially the same books with a different title.

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INTERVIEWERS

Can success be harmful?

COWLEY

They tell me that success is a terrible test of people. Thank God I've never had to undergo it. But nationwide success with money pouring in will kill lots of writers. Russell Lockridge, who wrote *Raintree County*, and Thomas Heggens, the author of that novel about a ship, *Mr. Roberts*, both committed suicide. It was always said that Gilbert Seldes's review of *The Great Gatsby*, which was ecstatic, probably damaged Scott Fitzgerald. The trouble is that after something like that, every work has to count. . . every word has to live up to this marvelous praise. The poor author gets stage fright.

INTERVIEWERS

Are the creative impulses involved in writing poetry and essays vastly different?

COWLEY

There is a different process involved: the poem has to start with an emotion. After that, you call on the same parts of your mind during the creative process, but the beginning is quite different. With the essay you start out with a given or chosen subject. The poem comes to you.

INTERVIEWERS

Are there mnemonic devices to get you going on a day's work?

COWLEY

A lot of people use walking. I wonder if the decline of walking will lead to a decline of the creative process.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you see a relationship between unhappiness and poetic creativity?

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COWLEY

To the extent that poems may be born from a straining of one's senses and imagination to a degree to which they couldn't be strained in ordinary life. I was reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's correspondence the other day. Scott and Zelda's difficulties were ones that I never had to face; I never had to drive myself to drink in order to get my imagination working. Actually, I found my imagination worked best on fatigue. That's another form of intoxication. . . to set yourself writing, and keep on writing until after two or three hours the subconscious takes over. It's certainly safer than alcohol. The trouble with alcohol is that you can't keep it up.

I went to visit the Fitzgeralds when they were living outside of Baltimore—a place called "La Paix." Scott said to me, "I'm on the wagon, but I got you a pint of whiskey from my bootlegger; I'm on water." So we talked, or mostly *he* talked, and every once in a while he'd go out to the kitchen to get another glass of water. His talk became more belligerent, sometimes incoherent, until finally he said, "You know, that water I've been drinking all evening—it's half grain alcohol." I said to myself, "Oh. . . surprise!"

INTERVIEWERS

So alcohol is of no use?

COWLEY

Sometimes Edmund Wilson said a glass of whiskey would get him started on a piece—would help with the start and perhaps the finish. But usually the writer is sober when he writes. He had better be. John Cheever used to say he could tell from a writer's work if he'd had a drink.

INTERVIEWERS

It's been reported that you discovered John Cheever.

COWLEY

Nobody ever discovered John Cheever; he discovered himself. But what you ask about was as close to discovery as an

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editor can hope for. I was the junior editor on *The New Republic* in 1930. A manuscript came in marked for my attention; it was a story on yellow copy paper called, "Expelled from Prep School." I read it with great interest and carried it to Bruce Bliven, the managing editor. Bruce said, "Well, it's a little long. Cut it down by half and we'll take it." We did take it. A couple of months after that, John Cheever himself appeared. He was eighteen. His brother had given him an allowance of ten dollars a week to try to be a writer in New York. That memoir was the first I read of John's. He began writing stories—published in small magazines that didn't pay. . . always stories about seven thousand words in length, very fresh and good, too, but with no hope of their being published by magazines that paid money.

One Friday night when John was at our house for dinner, I told him, "Tomorrow, write a story of one thousand words. Sunday, write another, and Monday write another, three and a half pages, and do the same thing on Tuesday." Wednesday was my day at *The New Republic* for seeing contributors, so I said, "Bring them all in on Wednesday and I'll see if I can't get you some money."

Well, this sounds like wise old Nestor telling a young author what to do. But I knew John; nobody else could have invented four stories in four days. But on Wednesday he brought in four thousand-word stories. *The New Republic* didn't print fiction, but I thought one of them could be considered local color. So I got that one accepted, and I sent the other three stories to Katharine White at *The New Yorker*. She took two of them, and John was launched on his career as a professional writer.

INTERVIEWERS

Who worked with William Faulkner at Random House?

COWLEY

A succession of people, but they didn't really work with him at first. I don't think they always read proofs of his novels, at least in the late 1930's, because some of them are marred by errors in grammar that Faulkner would have been glad to have

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pointed out to him, and would have fixed up. But he absolutely could not have stomached receiving a critique on the whole concept of a book—the sort of thing that Maxwell Perkins at Scribners might have put together—and he certainly would not have written a book to order.

INTERVIEWERS

And yet he spent those years in Hollywood.

COWLEY

Cynically. He didn't think he was actually any good in Hollywood. He was able to work consistently with only one director, and that was Howard Hawks. One thing that has never been published about Faulkner is that he thought his best movie was *The Southerner*, the Jean Renoir film, for which he did not get movie credit. He was under contract to Warner Brothers and could not let it be known that he had worked for another studio.

INTERVIEWERS

What about your own remarkable identification with Faulkner's work?

COWLEY

I shouldn't be given all the credit for rescuing Faulkner from neglect. There were always men of letters in this country —Conrad Aiken, Robert Penn Warren and a couple of others, Caroline Gordon, especially—who were enthusiastic about Faulkner's writing. But it is true that public estimation of his books sank so low that by the middle of the War, only one book, *Sanctuary*, was not out of print; his publishers had donated the plates of other novels to the war effort to be melted down and to make copper jacketings for bullets. The publishers were very patriotic. So at that time I had the strong feeling that Faulkner had to be brought back. I had done a Hemingway Portable for the Viking Press, a book that came early in their series of Portables. I had suggested, "Why not a Faulkner Portable?" Viking replied, "We don't think Faulkner has

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sufficient public to justify a Portable.'' That wasn't enough for me. Fortunately, through Matty Josephson I had been offered a contract to write a history of American literature. I always hated big undertakings—the sort of thing he suggested—so I thought I'd break it down and do one author at a time. Since I'd been reading Faulkner and believed that among the writers of his generation his public reputation was the one most out of line with his extraordinary talent, the choice was compulsive. I took about ninety single-spaced pages of notes. Then I began writing an essay which got to be too long for any magazine to print as a whole. So I ''beefed'' it—I got that phrase from George Milburn, a writer and a good one, too, who came from the back country in Oklahoma. He told me that he had beefed a novel by cutting it into steaks and selling them to *The New Yorker*. I beefed the essay on Faulkner and sold chunks of it to three magazines.

At the time I was helped financially by an extraordinary piece of good luck. It was during the war. The phone rang, and the voice at the other end said, ''This is Stanley Young. How would you like to be supported for five years?'' I said, textually, ''Well, I'd like that fine, but I'm getting along all right. Why don't you make that offer to Kenneth Burke?''—who was my oldest friend. Stanley said, ''Oh, no. We'll think about Kenneth later. In the meantime, we'd like you to figure out how much it would take you to live for five years.'' He went on to explain. ''This is an idea of Mary Mellon's, of the Pittsburgh Mellons. You come in and have lunch with Mary and if you pass muster this idea of hers will go through.''

So I had lunch with Mary Mellon. I think I drank too many martinis. I talked very much and excitedly. So it went through. For five years I received, under contract with Mary Mellon, five thousand five hundred dollars per year, which seemed a great deal of money to me.

Four other people got this arrangement. Then it was decided the plan wasn't working. When Mary Mellon died, Paul Mellon closed out all the contracts, which he was quite right to do. As a matter of fact, I was the only one of the five authors who carried through on the aim of the plan. It enabled me to

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do a great deal of work on authors, including Faulkner, while at the same time being rather standoffish about publication.

Of course, it could have been an opportunity to write poetry, but I kept remembering that the arrangement was only for five years. At the end of that time I would still have to live mostly by writing for magazines. So I "beefed"—cut steaks and roasts from—the long Faulkner essay and published them.

One day Marshall Best of the Viking Press called and said, "It seems to us that Faulkner's work is attracting a good deal of attention in magazines. We're thinking of going ahead with the Faulkner Portable." I said, modestly, "Yes. It is attracting a good deal of attention." I had this idea of putting together an outline of the Yoknapatawpha County saga in the Portable. I also had an idea that Faulkner might help me on this with advice. It turned out he was most eager to do so.

So we worked through this, discussing by letter what should go in and what should stay out—a correspondence published in a book called *The Faulkner-Cowley File*. At the end of it Faulkner wrote and added a biographical dictionary of the Compson family. When the Portable came out, Faulkner inscribed a copy to me, writing, "Damn you, you've done what was supposed to be the occupation of my declining years." Apparently, that's what he had wanted one day to do himself.

INTERVIEWERS

Was the Faulkner Portable an immediate success?

COWLEY

The Portable couldn't have started a renewed interest in Faulkner's work if it hadn't been for Caroline Gordon, who did a front-page review for *The New York Times*, and Robert Penn Warren, who reviewed it for *The New Republic* in an article so long that it had to be published in two issues. From that time on, Faulkner, who had been completely beneath the dignity of English Departments to talk about, began to be studied by graduate students.

INTERVIEWERS

What was your personal relationship with Faulkner?

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COWLEY

Beginning in 1944 we had quite a correspondence. I wrote him a letter saying I wanted to do a piece about his work. I hoped to meet him. After four or five months he answered from Hollywood. He explained that when he got letters from strangers, first he opened them to see if there was return postage. If there was, he used the stamps. As for the letters, he'd drop them in a drawer and then, he said, every six months or so he'd open the drawer and begin to read the letters. Mine had been luckier; it had only waited in the drawer three or four months. He wrote me that the idea of finishing his career without having attracted any more attention than he had done so far was painful and, yes, he would be grateful to have a long essay written about him, but he didn't want any personal details included. He wanted to live anonymously. He wrote me in one of his letters that he wanted his tombstone inscribed, "He wrote the books and he died."

INTERVIEWERS

Did you know that there is an odd typographical error on his tombstone in Oxford, Mississippi? It reads, "Belove'd Go to God." It was probably supposed to say "Belovèd Go to God," but the carver misread the accent mark for an apostrophe.

COWLEY

I think he would have smiled at that.

INTERVIEWERS

Was he a good storyteller in person?

COWLEY

He would tell a story very much as stories were told on the "gallery," as they call it, of a little one-room store in Mississippi—men squatting on their heels in overalls and chewing tobacco. He didn't chew tobacco, but he told stories the way backwoods storytellers told them, which was very entertaining. He wasn't one of them, but he fit in. In Oxford they called him "Count No Count."

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INTERVIEWERS

Did Faulkner know Hemingway?

COWLEY

Hemingway and Faulkner never met, but they read each other and profited by the reading, Faulkner especially. It's largely a question of emulation that causes writers to appear as if in groups. Even if they never meet, they read each other.

INTERVIEWERS

Hemingway's life has always been closely linked to his work. Now that his private letters have been published, what effect do you think they'll have on his reputation?

COWLEY

His reputation as a man will go down because there's a great deal of malice, rivalry, and plain falsehood in his letters. All his weaknesses of character come out, and in the published letters they're not balanced or driven from your mind by his tremendous personality. He had a gift for charming people by giving them his undivided attention. As he said, so few people know how to listen. That's one way he charmed people, by listening. At the same time he was always suggesting expeditions and adventures, so that in personal relations he had an enormous charm that doesn't come through in the letters.

INTERVIEWERS

It's difficult to reconcile this charm with the impression one gets from the letters.

COWLEY

Well, he wrote those letters very often late at night when he couldn't sleep. Frequently he wouldn't mail the letters because they told too much. But I think if you sit back from that collection of printed letters and consider what he's saying, you can begin to get a picture of his charm, because for each of the persons he was writing to he had adopted a different story. He was projecting himself into their different personalities.

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INTERVIEWERS

I recall Selden Rodman's comparing Hemingway to Byron and saying that Hemingway's genius was essentially comic.

COWLEY

Comic isn't the word. He was never a comic writer. He was often a satirist, and a cruel one.

INTERVIEWERS

What would you say was the essence of his genius?

COWLEY

A sort of restoration to literature of various primal qualities. There's almost the quality of a medieval lyric in much of Hemingway's writing. It's fresh. If you read *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the chapter that begins with the month of May at King Arthur's court, there's a freshness in it that one finds again in Hemingway.

I think he is a lyric writer, more or less. He always had trouble with plots because he wasn't so much filling out a plot as he was making a journey or progression, day by day. Later he would try to fit that into a plot. If it came out well, it came out very well indeed. At other times he stumbled off the path, as in two or three of his unpublished manuscripts.

INTERVIEWERS

Despite these difficulties with plot, he was a very good storyteller?

COWLEY

As a storyteller in company he was amazing. He was even more amazing in the matter of simple vitality. When he came into a room, he filled it, as people say.

INTERVIEWERS

Were his ethics as great as his vitality?

COWLEY

As a writer his ethics were very strong . . . that is, his ethics

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governing the relationship between his "me" and the product of "me"; it would be hard to find any higher. But as a man in relation to other writers—Dos Passos, for instance—his ethics were lower than a snake's belly.

INTERVIEWERS

This question of ethics in relation to fiction seems to be a current critical concern. What is your opinion of John Gardner's contention, in *On Moral Fiction*, that fiction must point out a moral, or that the worth of fiction can be assessed in terms of the ethic it espouses?

COWLEY

He's got hold of a half-truth. Any fiction should be a story. In any story there are three elements: persons, a situation, and the fact that in the end something has changed. If nothing has changed, it isn't a story. Almost every story, therefore, becomes a fable, because the change is usually for better or worse. And if the reader extends the applicability of this change from a particular set of events to another, then he's drawn out of the story a fable with a moral. And, of course, every work of fiction involves moral judgments concerning the characters . . . judgments that the author reveals by his style or his choice of details, if in no other fashion.

There is another sense as well in which not only fiction, but all kinds of writing are moral. Almost every work set on paper involves a choice. The writing of one page might involve hundreds of moral decisions. "Shall I use this word, which easily comes to hand, or shall I stop and search my mind for a slightly better word?" Those are aesthetic decisions which almost always have a moral element. Choosing the hard over the easy is already a moral choice.

INTERVIEWERS

Faced with moral considerations, can you as a critic render a positive judgment of a book's aesthetics while at the same time disliking its meaning?

COWLEY

I can do that, yes. I might wish that the author had a differ-

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ent set of morals. And I can also make my judgment by not reading the book—a very easy way to get around it.

INTERVIEWERS

What do you find yourself reading nowadays?

COWLEY

I too often pick up magazines. I read *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Review*, and sometimes *The New Yorker*, against which my complaint is that the articles are too long. If I get hooked on one, the evening is shot.

INTERVIEWERS

Has there been a change in the character of the publishing houses?

COWLEY

It's always been a strange profession; publishers and editors seem to change jobs more than men in other professions. They go from house to house like baseball players . . . except they're not sold, or traded. Those who really change places are the publicity directors . . . musical chairs!

INTERVIEWERS

What about the relationship between the editor and the author?

COWLEY

These days there's a good deal more directed writing in which bright young publishers or editors dream up an idea for a book and then think of somebody to write it. Part of the creative process, at least in nonfiction, has moved over from the writer to the editor.

INTERVIEWERS

What would someone like Maxwell Perkins have made of this trend?

COWLEY

Perkins wasn't much interested in nonfiction. But with fic-

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tion, he took a tremendous hand . . . concerned with motivation, the handling of scenes, and the overall picture of a book . . . so much so that he was capable of writing ninety pages of directions and suggestions. He did this for Marcia Davenport's *Valley of Decisions*. She put Max's directions to the left of her typewriter and her original manuscript on the right; she looked at Max's directions, then at the manuscript, and she retyped the book. It subsequently became very successful.

INTERVIEWERS

What are the distinguishing attributes of a good publishing house editor?

COWLEY

The first ingredient would be a nose for good writers. And then loyalty to the writer once he found him. The most loyal editor in the whole game was Pat Covici at the Viking Press, who was loyal to his authors in a way that made the authors completely loyal to him. He did this with his interest, his confidence, his offer of whatever help they needed. Steinbeck wrote a whole volume of letters to Pat when he was working on *East of Eden*.

INTERVIEWERS

What about an editor's attitude towards public taste?

COWLEY

If an editor begins to let the concept of catering to the public weigh on him he becomes, to me, a bad editor. An editor should have an idea of what meets his own taste; that should provide the criterion. The whole notion of divining the public taste has been one of the deadliest ideas of publishing. When *True Confessions* was at the height of its success, a new fiction editor was picked every month. She would be one of the typists in the office, preferably the youngest, because it was felt that if she followed her own honest feeling about what was good, that was what the public wanted. After a month or so, she would become too sophisticated and then they would fire her as the

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fiction editor and take on another typist. That was cynicism carried to the extreme, but it may well have produced better results than an editor guessing at what the public might like.

INTERVIEWERS

What has been the most rewarding aspect of your long career in literature?

COWLEY

Writing becomes its own reward. What do you need from others—except a little money—if you have satisfied the stern critic in yourself? For me the most rewarding moments have been those when I knew that a book was finished at last and ready to be printed. I remember one such moment; it was when I finished the revised edition of *Exile's Return*, in 1951. I had worked on the revision happily, being a revisionist by instinct, and most of the manuscript had gone to the printer. But there was a necessary appendix still to come, and it had to reach the Viking Press by a certain date or else the book would be postponed to another season. I have the story in an old notebook. *(There is a long pause while Cowley finds and pages through the notebook.)*

The date for Viking was March 30, 1951. I finished and sealed and addressed the appendix at half-past eight in the evening of March 29. In those fortunate days there was a mail car on the train that left Pawling at 9:05, and letters given to the clerk were delivered in New York the following morning. Pawling was a dozen miles from our house, over back roads. I drove there with Muriel and our son Rob and missed the train by three minutes. Then I raced it fifteen miles south to Brewster, at the risk of wiping out the family. This time the train was pulling out of the station just as we pulled in. I raced it again to Croton Falls, where Rob ran hard and gave my big envelope to the mail clerk just as the wheels of the engine started to turn. At last the book was out of my hands, finished to my satisfaction, and I was exultant. We drove home slowly while I sang old songs in a cracked voice.

—John McCall
—George Plimpton

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David Shapiro

St. Barnabas

My mother said,
All surgeons want to do is surge.
And as one took the staples from her skull
She said, Neurosurgeons are not nice.

Mostly blind and leaning against a wall
She told my father, Irv, you can be replaced
God forbid I should sit where I want to sit,
And what's wrong with this chair pray?

Sitting and crying, she said
This is not Chekhovian
Or Tolstoyan, David.
This is annoying.

Lying on the angiogram cot, strapped down and hot
and bloody,
My mother said, The worst words in the English language
Are these David—Don't move.
And what do you think the best words are: Here's some
water.

My mother said,
I'm not wavery because I have a wall
And I love it—
Walls are convenient because they don't move.

One day I walked with a tube of toothpaste in my hand
And Debbie said What are you doing with the tube of
toothpaste

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I don't know I forgot to put it down
I noticed a slight look of contempt on Debbie's face

Poor Debbie
It must be awful to have a mother who's not very bright
Who asks you what day it is
As Michael and Noah would say Ech and Yuch

The other day we were expecting a new Maytag
And Willimae who's very bossy said
Oh Mrs. Shapiro the Maytag men are here
Put your wig on? For what! Ridiculous!

Sometimes Dad grabs my face and points me
    In the direction he wants to go
And I say Why do I have to go in that direction
I usually respond, Well, go; he doesn't need me to help him
He's adamant about the direction he wants to go

The worst thing about a cardiovascular accident
Is not being able to walk up steps
I can walk around a room
But I can't walk upstairs

There are things in closets I've put away months ago
And I can't get up there to see them
Just clothes
And I can't get downstairs to the cellar to do the
    wash—a pillow case full of dirty clothes

And Irv says Oh they're not dirty
But I think they are
And sometimes I ask Irv to put real hot water in the sink
    so I can take a sink bath
And he'll say You just washed

Don't get a cerebral vascular accident

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If you can help it
Well maybe a long time ago I would have thought you could
eat
a lot of sweets and die of a high insulin reaction
But I wouldn't advise anyone to do that

Years ago I used to say I'm so lucky
If I want to get out of this thing all I have to do
is eat one or two sundaes
And I'll have a diabetic coma
No problem

We sit and we listen to a lot of opera
Pavarotti sometimes Boeriling Martinelli
The best thing I've heard recently is the Mozart quintet
with Heifetz and Patiagorsky and somebody Domingo

And I find myself crying because I never hear
live music anymore
It's all canned
If you played here
It would be very much alive

Everybody loved my Dad because he laughed at everybody
He had a magnificent laugh with tears
When comics came to South Africa they'd invite him
To sit in the front row—he'd laugh loudly

It was quite apparent to me that Pop was not laughing AT
me.
And I would stand by the open window when I was 5
or 6 and pretend to be *dovenning*.
And he would laugh and laugh, this little girl who was
praying.

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My mother said, If you have a beautiful speaking voice
You can count on a beautiful singing voice.
I used to imitate the little boys in his choir. I would give myself
a boy's nasal voice, and he would laugh.

Sleeping in Gideon's twin bed, and John's twin bed,
and Pop was telling me stories in Yiddish
About little tiny people who sleep in rosebuds.
All Pop's stories were about miniatures,
mice who ate the crumbs or babies who sleep in rosebuds.
Little people
Nice families who had children so tiny they could hardly see them
and how happy they were with these almost unseeable people
he loved furniture that was too small for anyone to sit in
And then we would end with this famous two lines
They were famous because I didn't know what they meant,
A steckel a rein a steckel a reus
die meis ist aus
Stick in, stick out
The story is finished.
It meant I couldn't nag him to tell me more, I was to go to sleep.
In. Out.
He never told me a story without ending it that way, ever.

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Of Sisters

Mary Alice Ayers

It all started with the house, which looks a bit like a bird about to fly off the dune. Three levels, all almost entirely glass, jut out at angles to each other and to the beach so that every room has a view of the Atlantic. Behind the dune and the house, off its own separate walk, is a storage shed that has no glass at all. Here Calvin, the man whose house this was, the man who gave this house to me, who loves me, piled his firewood, and here I have imprisoned the witch, my sister, who does not.

We had driven out from New York this morning, through a cold wind so strong it shook the car. Working, moving about quickly, we still felt cold, and decided to have a fire. We needed wood, which was in the shed. I lifted the first armful and started out the door—it slammed behind me, and appeared to have locked. I listened to Lois's cries for a while—she suffers from claustrophobia—then I went back up to the house, where I now stand.

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My sister said because I didn't take money from them I wasn't quite a whore.

Such values. A whore, imagine. I locked her up after she said that and I'm not going to let her out until she recants. I'm not a whore at all. Or am I?

Beyond my glass-walled living room the Atlantic is a dull slate grey. The strong wind, coming out of the north, has pressed it smooth, and above the grey ocean, the sky, a niveous white, promises winter. The sky is drifting away from me, turning a cold grey too on its way towards Africa, where it will be warmed and perhaps brightened to a blue. I thought about warmth and wanted the fire we had planned. Tearing the newspapers, wadding them, placing them on the hard tiles, positioning the kindling, then carefully overlapping the logs—all this took time, and activated my memory.

At twenty-nine I was no man's wife, no child's mother. Lois was five years my senior, but I was treated as the older sister because I had more experience with things. Things like college, which Lois passed by, choosing marriage instead. Before she married, Lois craved childbirth. Perhaps childbirth was orgasmic for her—she had been delivered of eight children in ten years.

As the fire caught, I saw Stanley, the composer who has a cube of a house below and to the west of mine, coming up my walk. He has long hair that curls when it so much as smells the sea, and the look, as he bobbed along, was reminiscent of the Christ.

I had told him my sister was coming to spend the weekend, to help with closing the house, and I wondered how I would explain her absence. I came up with, "She's lying down."

"I thought you both might join me for dinner. Is Calvin coming out?"

"Not expected to. Look, Lois isn't feeling well. We'd better make it another time."

"That will be next year."

"Well."

Although Stanley had a very mincing manner, he was not

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homosexual; he would like a taste of me if he had the chance. But we had never been alone; Calvin had been out every weekend. We were not alone now, but if Lois screamed, her cries would be carried by that strong north wind out to sea, to the Sahara, where a sandstorm would cover them up for all time. It didn't take much effort—when he shook my hand at the door to say goodbye, I held on to it. It seemed in poor taste to do what we did with all that glass, with all those houses stretching behind us to the end of the peninsula, but I knew there was no one to see. It ended soon enough, but left me in a better humor—irenic, consoled, hopeful. I would look in on my sister.

"Lois!" I called through the closed door once, twice, three times. No answer. But how could there not be an answer? Had she gotten herself out and gone off? I pulled at the door but it didn't budge. Warping was the problem; it would take a man to solve it, at least from where I was standing. But from inside the shed. . . . Possibly Lois had been able to push the door out. If she had escaped, she wasn't in the house or on the dunes; I would see her from where I was. Unless she was hiding from me.

Because of the new moon and the season, the ocean was high. A stretch of sand about two cars wide was all that remained of a beach that in summer was four hundred feet from breaker to the first bed of grass. Along this stretch, slowly coming towards me, was a jeep, which Eliot was driving. Eliot was a plumber in season, a caretaker off. He stopped and asked if I was in trouble, or if I needed a lift somewhere. I climbed into the front seat next to him. "Just drive a ways," I said. Eliot had a flask of whiskey with him. It was a flavorless rye but it did the job. By the time we got to the bridge that linked the mainland to the peninsula at its far point, I wasn't cold, or worried. He stopped, but left the engine running, and we looked at the ocean. *He* looked at the ocean, rather; I looked at his hands, which were very white, long and slender, more like a musician's than a plumber's. Eliot had finished two years of college, and then, bored, had enlisted in the navy. After staring at all that water for three years, he decided on his profession. He read a

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lot, liked to talk about what he was reading, and talked with his hands. I had wanted to touch his hands for a long time. That was all, absolutely all, I wanted to do then, but in a few moments I was balancing on his lap, looking at his neck, which was thick in contrast to the rest of him—it was almost as thick as a main drain, and it was very ruddy. Not unpleasant to be close to though, and as I moved rhythmically before it, for a few minutes I was able to forget about my sister; then Eliot drove me home.

The fire was still going strong and the living room was almost too hot. I meant to check up on Lois, but instead fell asleep on the sofa. When I awakened I thought about her immediately and wondered if she too had fallen asleep; if she had suffocated, there in the shed; if she had died.

My view of sand and sea and sky now included a man fishing. The tide had gone out somewhat, and he was standing on a ridge left by the receding water, casting downwind. The man looked like Jay Niles, who lived about ten dune houses to the east, and who didn't mind the cold or the wet so long as the fish were running. He was recently divorced but generally had a girl out with him. We had been dating heavily in New York before I met Calvin, who was considerably older and not half as much fun as Jay had been. Jay might help me open the warped door.

"The air's cold, but the water's still warm," Jay said when he saw me. It must have been—he didn't have on his waders. We embraced, with emphasis, more to recognize a former pleasure than a joy that might come, and over his shoulder I saw my sister, alive and walking and watching us from the dune. She had been moving rapidly along its crest. After she saw us, she stopped and started down the dune in our direction, which she knew was forbidden. That is, to cross a dune that way. It didn't take much for the sand to slide, or for the sea to lick at the indentation left by a footstep—too much walking lengthwise across the width of a dune and a cut would be made. More of the same from her and I'd have an inlet where I once had a house.

I didn't know if I was glad or sad she was all right. "Good to see you're up and out," I said, which revealed nothing to Jay as

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to up and out of what. "Where have you been?"

"I took a long walk—got as far as the bridge on the point."

Her face was expressionless, and, as she was not very smart—besides being totally without deliberate malice or desire to deceive—I assumed she had seen nothing, except Jay and me just now, which was no big deal, and which could be easily explained.

For dinner, we would enjoy a fresh blue that Jay had caught. I had company, more company than I dreamed would be possible—with Eliot, who had stopped by for a drink on his way home, Jay, who turned out to be alone for the weekend, and Stanley, who was more than willing to put his steak in the freezer for a chance to taste a fifteen pounder just raised from the sea. And, of course—I was just as pleased not to be alone with her—Lois. She was setting the table and seemed to enjoy being ancillary to me. The men were grouped around the fire, arguing happily over who would put on the next log.

The fireplace rose like a wall between two huge glass windows that faced the beach. The sea was black tonight, and the windows acted as mirrors in which we saw ourselves.

I saw the men—they were none of them very big. Stanley was thin and wiry, about 5′10″. Eliot was short, about my height, maybe two inches taller. Jay was average in height and weight but looked all legs, as if his trunk stood on stilts.

I saw my sister; I saw myself—I was wearing a sweater of hers that had shrunk in the wash. It wasn't so much that she was large or that I was small as I felt she was more, and I less. It was the comparative that hurt, that I was less than she. Three sizes less, to be exact. A psychiatrist, doubting the excuse of bodily measure, had despaired of clearing up whatever stood between us—although he did believe it related to why I could involve myself with men so easily in one way and not at all in others.

My big, so much bigger, sister. I still wanted something to happen to this big sister, but I didn't know exactly what.

I asked for a volunteer to tend bar, and Jay was the first to speak up. Because Lois wasn't used to liquor, she generally had a light vodka and tonic. But I didn't have any vodka, and she

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was deathly afraid of gin. She finally accepted scotch, which Jay, not knowing, poured with his usual heavy hand.

We were getting off to a very late start. The fish, which had only been caught at sunset, was not easy to clean. Jay had worked over it outside on the porch while I held the flashlight, a necessary task which prevented me from doing anything in the kitchen. Lois was not a good cook, never having had any time to work at it, and Stanley had arrived too late to be of any help. He had made use of the few minutes before we started drinking to ask Lois how she was, and what had been wrong with her. I looked the other way; in fact I wanted to start out the back door, but she calmly told him she had locked herself in the shed by mistake and the experience—the lack of oxygen and all—had made her dizzy. She felt fine now.

I was baking the fish on a bed of potatoes to absorb the oil, and such a big blue would probably take between an hour and an hour and a half. Raw fish is no fun, and there was plenty of booze to drink while we waited. I smelled sex in the air, baking slowly, as was the blue, but it was mostly conversation of the spiciest kind. I didn't think Lois had been exposed to talk of this type before, but that didn't mean I had to protect her from it. The men might have sensed her innocence and been inspired by it—they were each of them in top form.

By the time we started on a second round of drinks, illustration had replaced description—Eliot's navy stories were being acted out by Jay and myself while Stanley played his recorder, not exactly in accompaniment or in time. I am not by nature an extrovert but the audience brought out the performer in me. We were all having fun, except for Lois, who had a blank, dead look on her face—she couldn't appreciate our persiflage—and it seemed all too soon that the blue had to come out of the oven. With the huge green salad I had made and two loaves of garlic bread, we had a complete meal, though not a heavy one—fish is never filling—and the champagne that Stanley had been saving all season for a night such as this seemed to be floating bubble by bubble inside me.

After dinner Jay made stingers for everyone and we played charades; subject, books. Some were too simple. *The Story of O*

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took exactly one second. Even a seemingly difficult title like *Agents and Patients* took only a couple of guesses. I was very easily bored. Whether it was the boredom, or the stingers taking hold, I suddenly came up with an idea that might prove diverting. Since Stanley was still playing his recorder off and on, he might compose a piece for us, or give it a try.

"What to?" he asked. "Should it have lyrics?"

I thought for a second.

"Well. You could put to music something my sister said to me today."

I told them, but the remark itself was so unreal—in fact I was beginning to wonder myself if she had said it—that they all took it for a joke and laughed. Lois's face didn't reveal her emotion. Mine was a strange one; I had wanted her to get sick-drunk, but I sensed that I was the one who was no longer sober. I wasn't sure whether I had lost the ability to read my sister or whether I had just temporarily lost all ability to know what was going on.

Stanley began to compose in his mysterious fashion. Even with all my perceptions intact, it was impossible to hear a theme anywhere in his work—he was a twelve-tone composer. He blew on his recorder now and out came sounds that were more or less related, but there was no melody. At one point, after repeating a particularly short phrase twice, he said: "That's the whore part." Eliot got up and started pacing the floor, as if he were tired of Stanley being the star attraction. Suddenly he stopped pacing, walked over to Lois and said: "Without music, this is how the whore part works." He dropped down full-length on top of her, forcing her legs to separate. I wasn't jealous; his action showed a loyalty rather than a betrayal. Lois screamed, as I expected she would, and tried to push him off; then her voice broke and she lay still. "There's someone outside, looking in at us," she said. Her faced turned a cinereous grey.

Since Lois had never met Calvin, I couldn't blame her for being so scared. Calvin came in and seemed pleased to see us; we acted as if we were pleased to see him. He asked Lois if she were having a nice visit with me. Of sisters he knew little. He ex-

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plained that he'd gotten through work early and that his meeting for tomorrow had been cancelled. So he came out to be with his darling. Then he announced: "You're all about to suffocate. Don't you smell the smoke that's backed up into the room? I'll go up on the roof and see what's clogging the chimney."

He needed a ladder, and I went down with him to the storage shed, holding the door open until he was safely out with it. We had only a six foot A-ladder, so it was necessary for him to climb up from the top rung to get onto the roof. We all stood around on the deck and waited for him to discover what was wrong. Calvin appeared again on the edge. "It looks clean and clear," he said.

The wind had died down completely. "That's it," Jay said, "no wind. And the air's warmer. That's a condition that sets up a downdraft. We'll let the fire die a little and crack a window."

Calvin sat down on the edge of the roof and lowered a foot to the ladder. Then he hesitated; he couldn't seem to get the other foot down after the first. "It looks so far away," he said. He lifted his foot back up and asked for a drink. "I seem to be as afraid of heights as I was when I was a kid."

I went to get him his scotch; Stanley came along. "I've never understood your relationship," he whispered. Stanley wasn't very smart—pictures had to be drawn for him.

When we got back, Eliot was after Lois again. I overheard something like: "Eight children you say? Well, I bet you've never seen a man other than your husband."

I climbed up the ladder to hand Calvin his scotch and to offer to hold onto his foot if he cared to try again. When I turned around I saw Eliot, completely undressed, jumping up and down on the deck in front of Lois. Then Eliot ran down the dark walks with great leporine bounds. He passed us, still on the run, and jumped onto the staircase that went over my dune to the beach. In a minute he was in the surf, yelling, "Hey! It's warm," and then diving under a breaker. We had all had too much to drink; if the water didn't return us to total sobriety, it would at least clear our heads. I comforted Calvin, assuring him

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we would be better able to help him after our immersion.

Jay and Stanley had already dropped their clothes and joined Eliot beyond the breakers. The ocean was still lying flat as the north wind had left it. It was my kind of sea—generally I never swam at night, even in summer, because of sharks, but the tranquil water made me confident. Lois stripped, to my surprise; perhaps she felt safe in the dark, or that very little more could happen to her. She must have been somewhat uncomfortable about her nudity, because she got into the water very quickly, diving under the first breaker and swimming straight out beyond the men, whose heads and shoulders I could barely make out above the black sea.

The water was not as warm as had been promised, and I was glad I'd taken a sip of Calvin's scotch before leaving him. I had no intention of going out to where Lois was. I walked through the breakers, letting them part around me. It took me awhile to get to where the men were. Jay swam to me, reaching for my hips with his hands, and rubbed himself up against me for a time, but he was so cold he couldn't manage anything. He started back toward shore—I could see Stanley standing black in the white of the surf. Eliot floated by and stood up behind me, his front pressed to my back, to warm up, as he put it, before leaving the water. "Where's your sister?" he asked.

"She's somewhere out there."

"You both better get in. I think I'm getting a cramp."

"In a minute," I said.

The tide seemed to have turned. There was a very unpleasant pull, low in the water, about where my knees were. I turned around to get out and saw Lois swim by, standing up just a yard or so behind me. At the same time I realized that I was no longer able to stand, but was in over my head, which scared me. I went under a wave—it was really little more than a swell, yet I had gone under it. The surface of the ocean was so deceiving.

I called to Lois and asked if she could reach a hand to me—I was being sucked under. She moved toward me, still standing, although only a few feet from me, because she was so much taller. I grabbed her hand but nothing happened—the sea was so much stronger than she was. My body was numb from the cold.

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I went under again and swallowed some water. I gasped at Lois to go and get help, and because she was—thank god!—in the end such a sensible girl, she left me immediately rather than take the chance of both of us drowning. I rejoice now in the practicality that made her go and also in the sensibility that had kept her from blaming me for the shed incident, or for commenting on what she may have seen me do in the jeep with Eliot, or on the beach with Jay, or for never berating me for my groundless envy, which was really based on the fact that because she was born first she had had more opportunity to be with my father.

I hoped she would come back herself, with Stanley, who was a good swimmer, and Calvin, who was very tall and also a strong swimmer. The current pulled me under again and I tried not to take in any water; it was becoming harder and harder for me to breathe, in or out. Or to see. I could just make out the white line that was the surf, and the light grey that was the sand beyond the surf and the men shadowy not even discrete figures against the grey of the sand and, just visible above the pale light from the fire and the small lamps coming through the glass below, up on the roof, Calvin. I couldn't make out where Lois was, but imagined she was still moving through the dark water and hadn't reached the breakers.

While I waited, my mind had to be occupied so I would stay afloat and not drown. Stanley's composition came back to me, but I couldn't recall the music, only the lyrics, and where they had been written, but that was a good distance away from me, on the shore.

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Five Poems by Bill Knott

Lesson

Our love has chosen its appropriate gesture
Which when viewed in the midst of all the gestures
It didn't choose seems almost insignificant.

The gesture our love has chosen is appropriate
We both agree not that we have any choice but
Amidst all those others does seem insignificant.

Is it incumbent on us thus to therefore obliterate
All of the gestures except this insignificant one
Chosen by our love for its own no doubt reasons.

It is up to us to obliterate all other gestures
Though they cluster round thick as presentations
Of war and sacrifice in a grade school classroom.

Use of our love's chosen gesture for the obliteration
Of all those foreign gestures is forbidden however
We must find something else to erase them with.

Our love has chosen its appropriate gesture
Which when viewed in the absence of all other gestures
Seems to spell the opposite of insignificant.

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The Panther

I didn't get his name the music of the dancehall
Was point to the noise and names of those people
In whose apartment we mostly ended up: I do recall
That, before pairing me through a bed or two, he
Kicked his dress across the room, aiming, I think,
At someone who stepped smirking back: perhaps a friend.

And the following morning, groping groggily
Toward the elevators something dragged, I looked down,
There it was, snarled round my shoe. Immediately
I stood reminded of a scene I can't for sure say why:
A dancer, who has overslept, rushes by rote to dress
And ready a face all in a style obviously posthaste—

Clear to the ground floor I grinned at the inspection
Placque and thought: I want her like that, that panicked.
—Unprepared as the rest of us were, virgin-awkward
Each time we found ourselves under and in a fumble
For the unnatural rigor of alarm clocks or those
Damned thumb-blind buttonholes. . . .—Is it, do I fear

Her second-knowledge gained from years of training,
—How that slow-gathered grace-of-artifice still
Outstrips us and is what will remain beyond our dumbshow
Pleasures, japes, these small oblivionings of each other in
The name of freeing ourself, well, me, really?
And now her nine-o'clock pupils attack their barres.

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October

The leaves fall, but not far enough for me,
so I take one up to the top of my favorite highrise,
the one whose TV-transmitters watch farmers.
Out over the roof-edge I drop it, but my eye
swerves to the hemline of a nearby tourist.
I wonder if anyone will notice it. The wind
is certain to vacillate its journey;
a vacillation is a vagueness with intent,
and my leaf is light. —And has her camera
caught me in the act, prolonging it even further—
Her blouse blows but now I notice most how
she caresses the camera, fondly, a personal
touch placed on what is after all a mere
automaton winking a robot eye. . . hmm, are mechanisms,
like, say, money, or credit cards, are they
harder to put one's traits on than a flower
for instance, or an ear of corn. . . For example
I know someone who has a five-dollar-bill
taped up on her wall with the name "Frank
Sinatra" scribbled across it, an autograph,
according to her, but is writing (or forging)
some name on money or on a machine,—?!
does a signature make it more human, natural,
leafier somehow. . . hell, money is not a good
example, it's not mechanic, I'm sorry. Damn.
Back on the track: the leaf falls, the farmers
farm and the tourist films till her camera's
involuntary functions are exhausted. . .
we head back down. The elevator control panel blinks
like a flightdeck or Star Trek or something,
then I notice buttons on her skirtfront—
I punch all the buttons on my shirtfront,
not knowing which direction that will get me,
yet suspecting that it too will not be far enough.

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(Sun, Sea, Rain) (Rain Season) (Port Townsend, Washington)

(for Tess Gallagher)

Each pine's sun-endowed
shadow follows April's down-
ward flights and where a crow's
muddy footprints show it sits
an initiating circle
on the ground and round
the wet grass, ring of council
I can be one in, passing
the ancient peacepipe filled
with rain to my right
or are you supposed to go left—?
Once again, and always,
for not knowing the rules
OK, I get expelled—
fool. Or as James Tate
once called me in a poem, paralytic,
cripple. . . it's true: I sit
praying to join in, the
spiral prance, skip-heel hop
of your raindance, sun! but—
But what? Stamping
a cigarette out on an ant I kick at
my mildewed metaphor's
whatchama crutches,
wobbly props of pinless hopes:
I groan up, and walk, ouch,
soft-putty self-pity patched,
cussing the fact that
I no longer have the faith
I was born with; I await
the faith I will die with; and
meanwhile

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the faith I live with, that
custodying lipserver, sticks
me near any old name-niche,
teeters me on
every pedestal of mislabeled
personae. . . so I watch
these madroña branches with a feel
for their similar swift elevations
downfalls—shifted by
(in descendent order,
and frequency:)
rainstorm, rain, and me.
I hear their leaf-whish as
an audio analogue of mist, which
is sister-common also, enhanceful,
to this place—

(Not an all at once thing, mist:
it curls into the world, pearl
being peeled)
—seemingly other parings litter
the ocean water; whitecaps,
chefs' hats, prepare
a hot potato-potluck good
on such choppy afternoons. . .

The sky boils and jumps
and does the mambo wambo
and hops and skips around
like a pair of black socks
laundered on the stove.

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Mitts and Gloves

(for Tom Lux)

The catcher holds a kangaroo fetus in his,
the firstbaseman's grips a portable hairblower,

but everyone else just stares into theirs
punching a fist into it, stumped

trying to come up with a proper occupant—
The pitcher for example thinks a good stout padlock would go

right in there, but the leftfielder,
perhaps influenced by his environment,

opts for a beercan. The shortstop,
informative about the ratio of power to size,

says "Transistor. You know, radio." The
secondbaseman however he just stands and

grins and flapjacks his from hand to hand and back again,
secondbase dopey as always. Alas

cries the thirdbaseman, this void
of vacancy, pure-space beyond our defiant emptiness,

abyss, haunted by the kiss of balls
we have not missed! oh absence

délice. . . . The rightfielder looks dis-
gusted at this, he just snorts, hawks, spits

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into his and croaks Hey look: heck,
my chaw of tobac fits it perfeck.

The team goes mum, cowhided by
the rectitude to his position, the logic.

Only the centerfielder, who was going back
while this discussion was going on,

putting jets on his cleats to catch the proverbial
long one,

does he perhaps have a suggestion . . . ?
As for the ball, off in mid air it dreamily

scratches its stitches and wonders
what it will look like tomorrow

when it wakes up
and the doctor removes its bandages—

CODA
Mitts are whitecollar: functionalists,
designed for firstbase, homeplate, unique, elite,

and therefore boring. The glove on
the other hand is common and

can be worn interchangeably by
all players; is dirty, low-down, dumb. I'm

forced to admire the mitt but
free (in theory) to love gloves.

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Portfolio

White Male Power

Mike Glier

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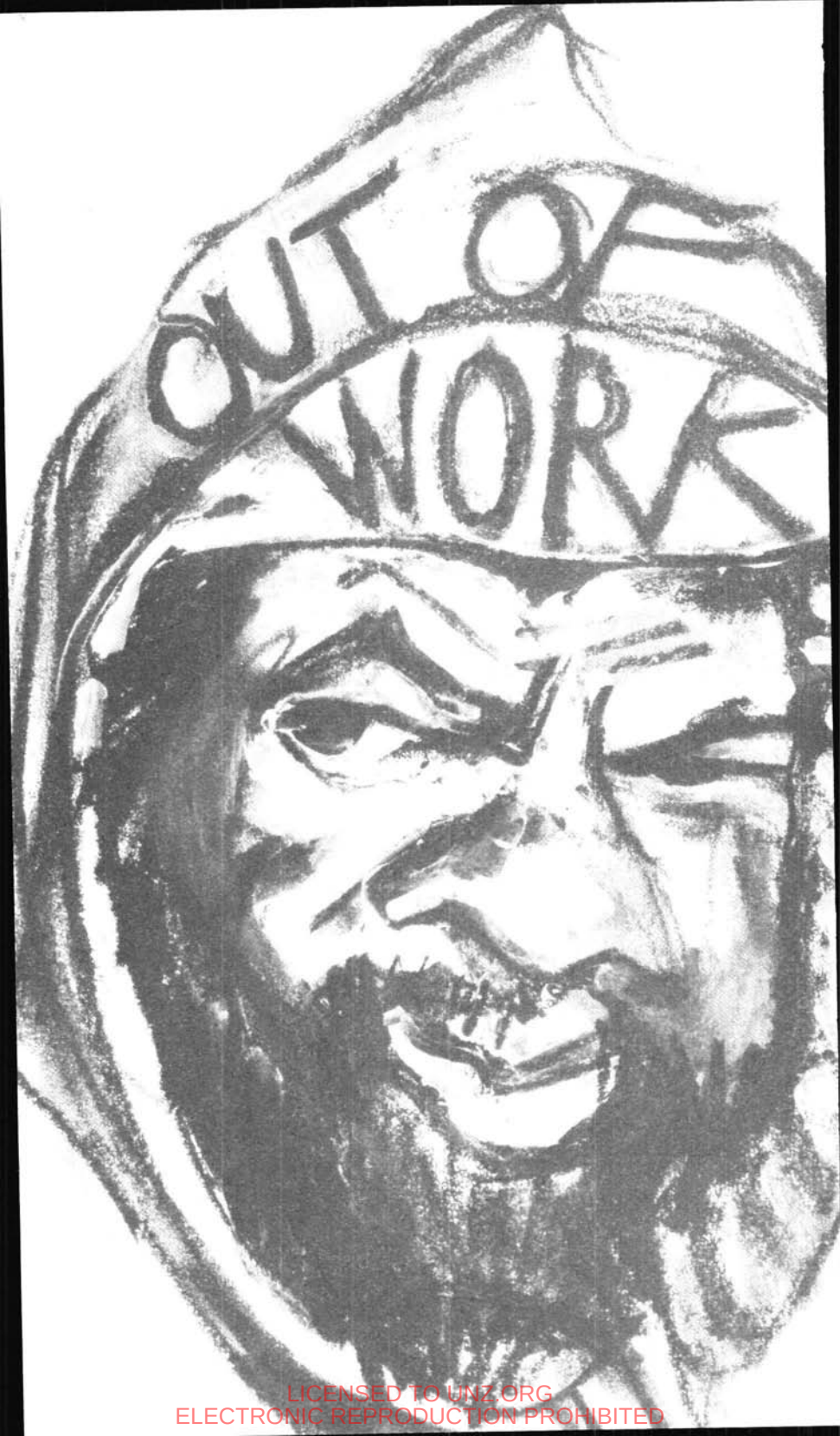

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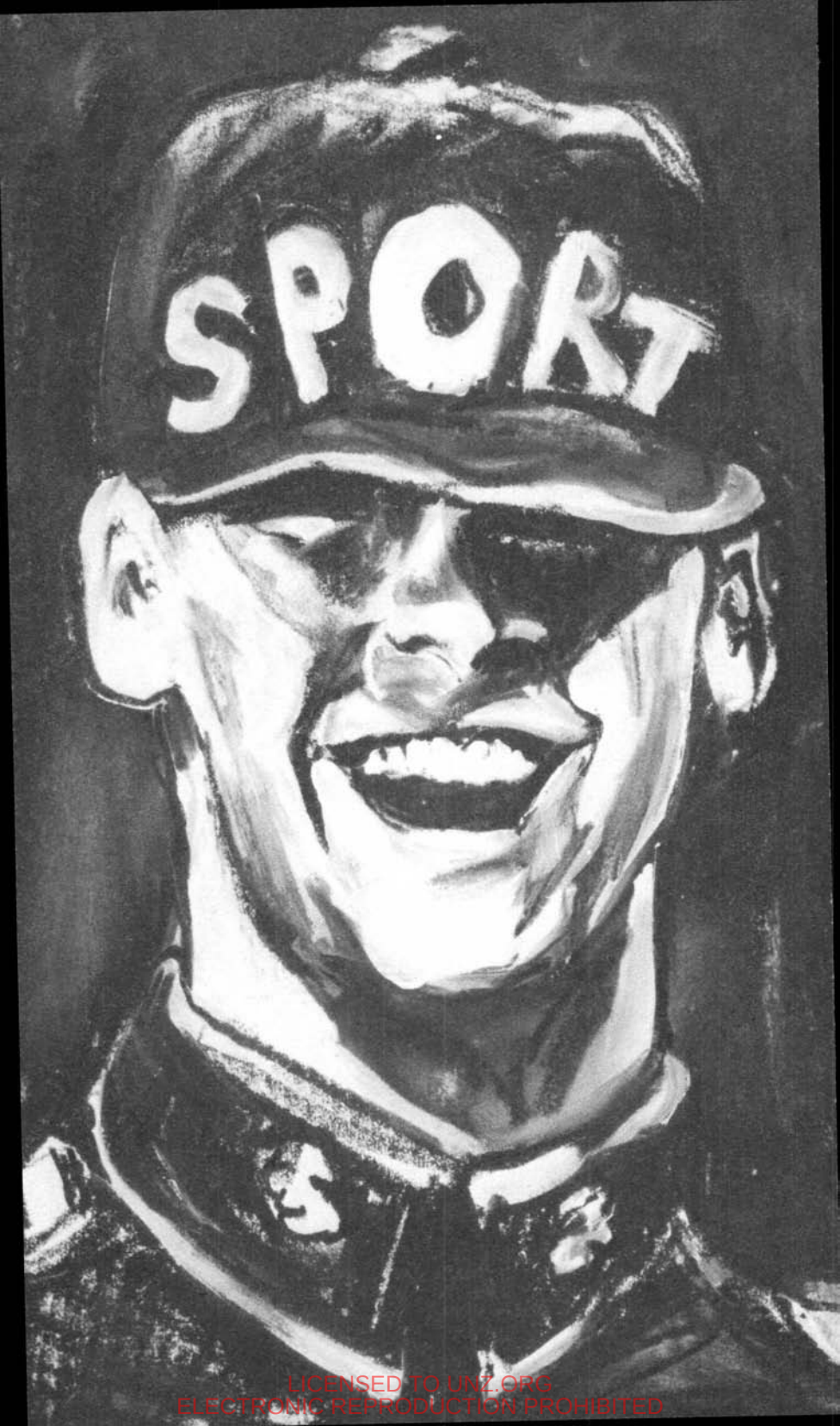

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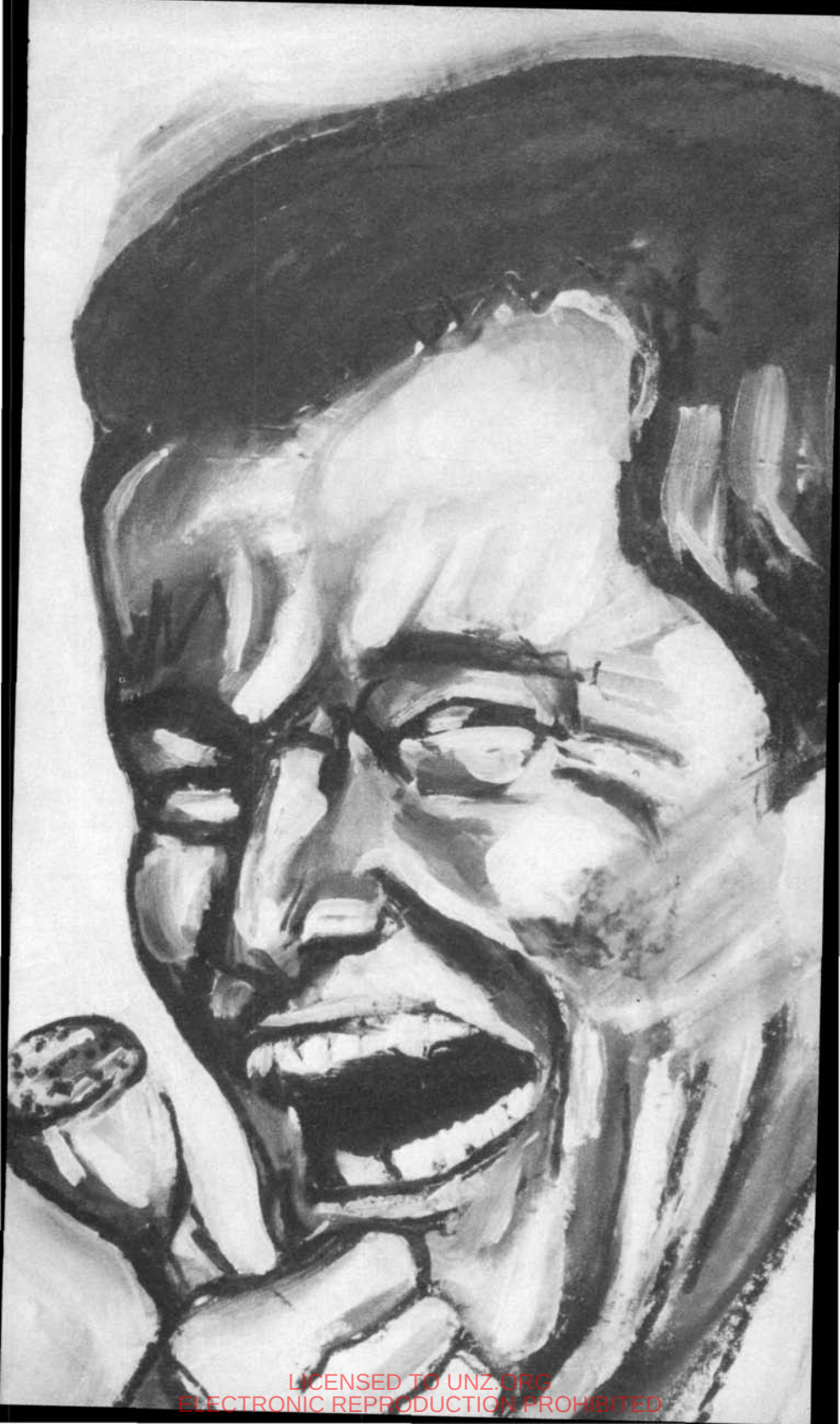

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CHAPTER [illegible]

[illegible] woman of forty, with [illegible] hair and a beautiful carriage. "Bonjour monsieur de ce," she said, and raised the front wheels of the teacart and then the back, so that they did not touch the telephone cord. When she had gone back to the kitchen, Harold said, "There are plates and cups for three, which can only mean that he is having breakfast with us."

"You think?" Barbara said.

"By his own choice," Harold said, "since there is now someone to bring him a tray in his room."

They sat and waited. In due time, Eugene appeared and drew the armchair up to the tea cart.

It was a beautiful day. The window was wide open and the sunlight was streaming in from the balcony. Eugène inquired about their evening with Sabine, and then said, "It is possible that I may be going down to the country on Friday. A cousin of Alix is marrying. [illegible]. And if I do go---as I should, since it is a family affair---it will be early in the morning, before you are up. And I may stay down for the weekend."

They tried not to look pleased.

He accepted a second cup of coffee and then asked what they had done about getting gasoline coupons. "But we don't need them," Harold said, and so, innocently, obliged Eugene to admit that he did. "I seldom enjoy the use of my car," he said plaintively, "and it would be pleasant to have the gasoline for short trips into the country now and then."

He reached into his bathrobe pocket and brought out a slip of paper on which he had written the address of the place they were to go to for gasoline coupons, [illegible].

"How can we ask for gasoline coupons if we don't have a car?" Harold

And the telephone, like a spoiled child that cannot endure the conversation of the grownups, started ringing. Eugène left the room. When he came back, he

Page from the working manuscript of The Chateau.

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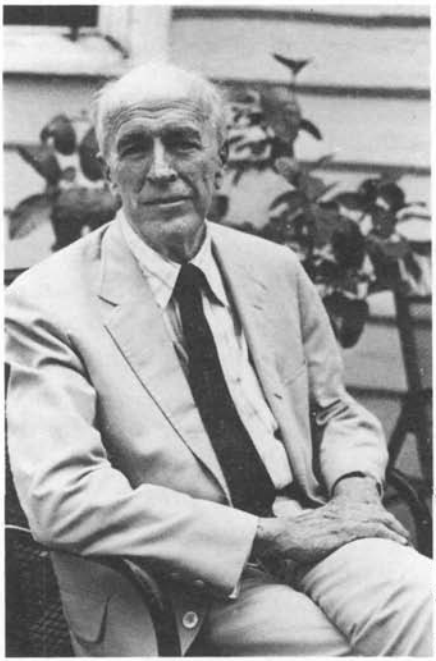

Brookie Maxwell

The Art of Fiction
William Maxwell

William Maxwell was interviewed in his East Side New York apartment. He wore a tie and blazer for the occasion. A tall, spare man, he sat on the edge of a low sofa, his knees nearly touching his chin. Twice he rose and went to the walnut bookcase, once for Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts, *and then for Eliot's* Four Quartets, *which he studied patiently for the lines he needed. At the end of the living room, two large windows looked out on the street, eight floors below, where one could see the morning traffic, but not hear it. The spacious room was furnished austerely—two vases of flowers stood on the mantel, a piano occupied one corner. The decor did not suggest Mr.*

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Maxwell's profession. The rapture with which he recited the Eliot did.

*Maxwell's parallel careers as a writer and an editor span nearly half a century. He wrote his first novel (*Bright Center of Heaven*) during the Depression; his most recent book,* So Long, See You Tomorrow, *published in 1979, won the William Dean Howell's Award presented for the most distinguished work of American fiction published in the preceding five years. Among his books are* They Came Like Swallows, The Folded Leaf, The Heavenly Tenants, *and* The Chateau.

His editing career, over a long association with The New Yorker, *has included working with John O'Hara, J.D. Salinger, John Cheever, and John Updike. One of his colleagues at* The New Yorker, *Brendan Gill, has supplied the following report on his friend:*

"In this interview William Maxwell at one juncture urges that the subject under discussion veer away from the New Yorker, *on the grounds that the magazine has been almost done to death, in one book or another. No doubt a book that I once wrote is one of the death-dealing volumes that Maxwell has in mind, but no matter—let me offer a brief quotation from my* Here at the New Yorker *(a title suggested, by the way, by the editor of the magazine, William Shawn; I would never have dared to propose it on my own):*

> *One day in my office I was showing Maxwell a Roman coin that I had purchased at Gimbels. With thousands of similar coins, it had been buried in the sands of Egypt by Ptolomy's army paymaster, in order to keep it from falling into the hands of the rapidly approaching Caesar. Maxwell jiggled the coin in his palm. "The odds," he said, "are on objects."*

True enough, but since Maxwell made the remark well over thirty years ago and since he and I are both in rude health and are evidently convinced that we have outwitted the need ever to die, we may be said to be doing not so badly, either as objects or subjects. And though Maxwell will enter history as a distinguished American author of the middle years of the twen-

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tieth century, he will also enter it in the reminiscences of many of his fellow authors as an exceptionally sympathetic and adroit editor. When I first met him, forty-five years ago, he was serving as Katharine White's assistant, but he looked so young and so readily abashable that I mistook him for an office-boy. I was right about his being young; I was wrong about his being abashable. He has a gentle voice to match his seemingly gentle heart, and yet I was to discover that on some level of his being he is as tough as nails. Maxwell said once of Shawn that he combines the best features of Napoleon and Saint Francis of Assisi; it is often the case when one makes such a comment about an associate that it will prove, at bottom, autobiographical. Unlike Shawn, Maxwell has been a joiner of organizations and has been happy in the acceptance of honors from the hands of his peers; at the same time, he is a loner. If he is a clubman, he is a clubman who eats and drinks by himself. Dr. Johnson would have stared askance at him, not in the least to Maxwell's dismay.

Over the years, how much Maxwell taught me about the art that I was trying to master and that was forever turning out to be more difficult than I had expected! How reluctant he was to reject a piece until every means of salvaging it had been explored! For a long time, Maxwell and I occupied adjoining offices in the squalid rabbit-warren of the New Yorker*; now and again in those days I would hear the faint, mouse-in-the-wainscot rustle of a note being slipped under my door. Opening the note, I would encounter five or six hastily typed words from Maxwell, in praise of something I had written. Snobbish as it is sure to sound, on the* New Yorker *we write not so much for readers out in the world as for one another, and it has always been for Shawn and Maxwell and Mitchell and Hamburger and the rest of my colleagues that I have written; on the occasions when a note from Maxwell appeared under my door, I felt ten feet tall and befuddled with joy."*

INTERVIEWERS

So Long, See You Tomorrow comes nineteen years after your

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previous novel. Why this gap?

MAXWELL

Nothing but being an editor probably, and working on other people's work. Which interested me very much. I had marvelous writers to work with. Quite a lot of me was satisfied just to be working with what they wrote. Besides, I write terribly slowly. The story "Over By The River" was started when the children were small and my older daughter was twenty when I finished it—it took over ten years. Undoubtedly if I knew exactly what I was doing, things would go faster, but if I saw the whole unwritten novel stretching out before me, chapter by chapter, like a landscape, I know I would put it aside in favor of something more uncertain—material that had a natural form that it was up to me to discover.So I never work from an outline. In 1948 we came home from France and I walked into the house, sat down at the typewriter with my hat still on my head, and wrote a page, a sort of rough statement of the book I meant to write, which I then thumbtacked to a shelf and didn't look at again until it was finished. To my surprise everything I had managed to do in the novel was on that page. But in general the thing creeps along slowly, like a mole in the dark.

With *So Long, See You Tomorrow* I felt that in this century the first-person narrator has to be a character and not just a narrative device. So I used myself as the "I" and the result was two stories, my own and Cletus Smith's, and I knew they had to be structurally combined, but how? One day I was in our house in Westchester County, and I was sitting on the side of the bed putting my shoes on, half stupified after a nap and thinking, If I sit on the edge of the bed I will ruin the mattress, when my attention was caught by a book. I opened it and read part of a long letter from Giacometti to Matisse describing how he came to do a certain piece of sculpture—*Palace at 4 A.M.*—it's in the Museum of Modern Art—and I said, "There's my novel!" It was as simple as that. But I didn't know until that moment whether the book would work out or not.

INTERVIEWERS

Much of your work seems to some extent autobiographical. Is

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autobiography just the raw material for fiction, or does it have a place in a novel or a story as a finished product?

MAXWELL

True autobiography is very different from anything I've ever written. Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* has a candor which comes from the intention of the writer to hand over his life. If the writer is really candid then it's good autobiography, and if he's not, then it's nothing at all. I don't feel that my stories, though they may appear to be autobiographical, represent an intention to hand over the whole of my life. They are fragments in which I am a character along with all the others. They're written from a considerable distance. I never feel exposed by them in any way.

As I get older I put more trust in what happened, which has a profound meaning if you can get at it. But what you invent is important too. Flaubert said that whatever you invent is true, even though you may not understand what the truth of it is.

When I reread *The Folded Leaf,* the parts I invented seem so real to me that I have quite a lot of trouble convincing myself they never actually happened.

INTERVIEWERS

How do you apply that to character? What is the process involved in making a real person into a fictional one?

MAXWELL

In *The Folded Leaf,* the man who owned the antique shop bore a considerable resemblance to John Mosher, who was the movie critic at *The New Yorker*. He was a terribly amusing man whom I was very fond of. Nothing that John ever said is in that book, but I felt a certain security at the beginning in the identification. Then I forgot about Mosher entirely, because the person in the book sprang to life. I knew what he would do in a given situation, and what he would say...that sudden confidence that makes the characters suddenly belong to you, and not just be borrowed from real life. Then you reach a further point where the character doesn't belong to you any longer, because he's taken off; there's nothing you can do but

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put down what he does and says. That's the best of all.

INTERVIEWERS

Virginia Woolf was an influence in your early work, wasn't she?

MAXWELL

Oh yes. She's there. Everybody's there. My first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, is a compendium of all the writers I loved and admired. In a symposium at Smith College, Saul Bellow said something that describes it to perfection. He said, "A writer is a reader who is moved to emulation." What I wrote when I was very young had some of the characteristic qualities of every writer I had any feeling for. It takes a while before that admiration sinks back and becomes unconscious. The writers stay with you for the rest of your life. But at least they don't intrude and become visible to the reader.

INTERVIEWERS

Well, all young writers have to come to terms with their literary fathers and mothers.

MAXWELL

And think what *To the Lighthouse* meant to me, how close Mrs. Ramsey is to my own idea of my mother. . . both of them gone, both leaving the family unable to navigate very well. It couldn't have failed to have a profound effect on me.

INTERVIEWERS

What exactly is the force that makes you a writer?

MAXWELL

Your question reminds me of something. I was having lunch with Pete Lemay, who was the publicity director at Knopf and is now a playwright, and he said that he had known Willa Cather when he was a young man. I asked what she was like and he told me at some length. It wasn't what I had assumed and because I was surprised I said, "Whatever made her a writer, do

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you suppose?'' and he said, ''Why, what makes anyone a writer—deprivation, of course.'' And then he begged my pardon. But I do think it's deprivation that makes people writers, if they have it in them to be a writer. With *Ancestors* I thought I was writing an account of my Campbellite forbears and the deprivation didn't even show up in the first draft, but the high point of the book emotionally turned out to be the two chapters dealing with our family life before and after my mother's death in the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. I had written about this before, in *They Came Like Swallows* and again in *The Folded Leaf,* where it is fictionalized out of recognition, but there was always something untold, something I remembered from that time. I meant *So Long, See You Tomorrow* to be the story of somebody else's tragedy but the narrative weight is evenly distributed between the rifle shot on the first page and my mother's absence. Now I have nothing more to say about the death of my mother, I think, forever. But it was a motivating force in four books. If my mother turns up again I will be astonished. I may even tell her to go away. But I do not think it will be necessary.

INTERVIEWERS

But to what extent can writing recover what you lose in life?

MAXWELL

If you get it all down there's a serenity that is marvelous. I don't mean just getting the facts down, but the degree of imagination you bring to it. Autobiography is simply the facts, but imagination is the landscape in which the facts take place, and the way that everything moves. When I went to France the first time I promptly fell in love with it. I was forty years old. My wife had been there as a child, and we were always looking for two things she remembered but didn't know where they were—a church at the end of a streetcar line and a chateau with a green lawn in front of it. We came home after four months because our money ran out. I couldn't bear not to be there, and so I began to write a novel about it. And for ten years I lived perfectly happily in France, remembering every town we passed

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through, every street we were ever on, everything that ever happened, including the weather. Of course, I was faced with the extremely difficult problem of how all this self-indulgence could be made into a novel.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you have an ideal reader in mind when you write? I've heard it said that a writer writes for himself and strangers.

MAXWELL

I think I write for myself, and I'm astonished that strangers are moved by it. I know that nobody else's praise or approval is enough for me to say, "All right, I don't have to worry about it any more" . . . I have to be satisfied myself that there is nothing more I can do to make it better.

INTERVIEWERS

But you must imagine readers.

MAXWELL

Oh yes, of course. While I'm writing I think I would like so-and-so to read this; but so-and-so changes from time to time, according to what I'm writing.

INTERVIEWERS

Will you talk about something while you're working on it?

MAXWELL

Oh no, that would be a serious mistake.

INTERVIEWERS

Why?

MAXWELL

Because more often than not the writer who talks about something he's working on talks it right out of existence.

INTERVIEWERS

Let's go back to what you were saying about recreating expe-

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riences in your fiction. What about writing that comes entirely from the imagination?

MAXWELL

I would love to be able to do that. Just open the door and invite everybody in.

INTERVIEWERS

Have you ever tried?

MAXWELL

I've tried in shorter things, in those tales that are neither fables nor fairy tales. I just hang over the typewriter waiting to see what is going to happen. It begins with the very first sentence. I don't will the sentence to come; I wait, as actively passive as I can possibly be. For some reason the phrase "Once upon a time" seems to be essential. Then, if I am sufficiently trusting, the rest of the story follows, and the last sentence is straight from the first. I also did it, to a considerable extent, in *Time Will Darken It*.

INTERVIEWERS

But would you suggest that would-be writers wait for something to drop into their heads? Isn't this a refutation of the theory that writing is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration?

MAXWELL

If they just sat and waited, maybe nothing would happen. Maybe they'd fall asleep. I think they should read—to learn how it is done—writing, I mean—and in the hope that what they read will in some way make their own experience available to them.

INTERVIEWERS

Do your best sentences come from on high, or are they the product of much working and reworking?

MAXWELL

There's something in the *Four Quartets* about language that

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doesn't disintegrate. That's what I try to do—write sentences that won't be like sand castles. I've gotten to the point where I seem to recognize a good sentence when I've written it on the typewriter. Often it's surrounded by junk. So I'm extremely careful. If a good sentence occurs in an otherwise boring paragraph, I cut it out, rubber-cement it to a sheet of typewriter paper, and put it in a folder. It's just like catching a fish in a creek. I pull out a sentence and slip a line through the gills and put it on a chain and am very careful not to mislay it. Sometimes I try that sentence in ten different places until finally it finds the place where it will stay—where the surrounding sentences attach themselves to it and it becomes part of them. In the end what I write is almost entirely made up of those sentences, which is why what I write now is so short. They come one by one, and sometimes in dubious company. Those sentences that are really valuable are mysterious—perhaps they come from another place, the way lyric poetry comes from another place. They come from some kind of unconscious foreknowledge of what you are going to do. Because when you find the place where a sentence finally belongs it is utterly final in a way you had no way of knowing: it depends on a thing you hadn't written. When I wrote those fables and sat with my head over the typewriter waiting patiently, empty as a bucket that somebody's turned upside down, I was waiting for a story to come from what you could call my unconscious. Or it could be from the general unconscious. Often before poets write a poem they begin to hear the cadences of it, and then they begin to hear humming in their ears, and there are other strange manifestations, and then finally words. The last is the words.

INTERVIEWERS

Are story writing and novel writing two vastly different enterprises?

MAXWELL

When I'm writing a novel, there's a sense that I have something more important by the tail; the reason for writing the novel is often that I don't know exactly what I do have. Sometimes I'm sustained by a metaphor or an image. In *The Folded*

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Leaf, I knew that the suicide attempt was the climactic part of the novel but I didn't know how I was going to get there; the image that sustained me throughout the whole of the writing was that of walking across a very flat landscape toward the mountains; when I got to the mountains the necessary scenes would occur. In *They Came Like Swallows*, I felt the book had to be like a stone cast into a pond. And a second stone, and a third—with the ripples moving outward from inside the first ones but never overtaking them.

INTERVIEWERS

How do you know when it's time to write another novel? Is it some sort of instinctual act, like the impulse that impels birds to migrate?

MAXWELL

I expect to live forever, and therefore I never get worried about what I ought to be writing, or about anything undone. In the case of *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, I was sitting at my desk, and something made me think of that boy I had failed to speak to, and thinking of him I winced. I saw myself wincing and I thought, "That's very odd indeed that after all these years you should have a response so acute; maybe that's worth investigating." And so that's what I set out to do.

INTERVIEWERS

You wrote somewhere that *So Long, See You Tomorrow* was a futile way of making amends. Was it really futile? Can't fiction make amends for real life?

MAXWELL

Forgiveness is in the hands of the injured, not the injurer. I don't know. Would you forgive me?

INTERVIEWERS

I would, sure.

MAXWELL

Well, that's comforting.

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INTERVIEWERS

You said that your mother's death made you a novelist. When did you first start writing?

MAXWELL

I sometimes think that children, without knowing it, are projected into the unlived lives of their parents. My mother's sister told me that when my mother was twelve years old she used to go up into the attic and "write on her novel." So perhaps I am a projection of my mother's unlived literary life. When I first began to write I was a freshman in a small town high school. I wrote a story about an aristocrat during the French Revolution who hid in a clock. If there were any French aristocrats in central Illinois in my boyhood I didn't know them. But at least we had a grandfather's clock in the front hall. Then we moved to Chicago and I wrote a little for the high school magazine. In college I began to write poetry. I'm not a poet, though. I've never written anything that comes from the place poetry comes from.

INTERVIEWERS

Is it a different place?

MAXWELL

When I was at Harvard I got to know Robert Fitzgerald, and I used to show my poems to him. In spite of the fact that I was older than he was—I was a graduate student and he was a sophomore—I had enormous respect for him. He was better educated than I was, and intransigent, and he despised anything that wasn't first rate. One day he looked at my poem and then he looked at me, rather in the way you look at children who present a problem, and he said, "Why don't you write prose?" I was so happy that he thought I could write anything that I just turned to and wrote prose—as if he'd given me permission to try. The prose took the form of fiction because I do like stories and don't have a very firm grasp on ideas.

INTERVIEWERS

How long was it after you began to write prose that you

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became sure you would be a writer?

MAXWELL

Oh, it began in pure pleasure. I left Harvard and went back to Urbana, and was rooming in the house of a woman who was teaching at the University of Illinois. A professor at Yale, a friend of hers, was doing a series of biographical essays; he sent her a two-volume life of Thomas Coke of Holkham—Coke introduced in Parliament the bill to recognize the American colonies, and was also an important agriculturist—and asked her to do a forty-page condensation that he could work from, and she split the job with me. She wanted to save me from becoming an English professor. I was then twenty-three. She let me have all the big scenes and she concentrated on the agriculture, which she said interested her. It did not interest me. The book was full of interesting people—for example, Lady Mary Coke, who was Coke of Holkham's aunt. She dressed her footmen in pea-green and silver livery and suffered from the delusion that the Empress Maria Teresa was trying to take her servants away from her. When she was depressed she would fish for goldfish in the ornamental pond in front of her house. And in her old age she slept in a dresser drawer. Anyway, I had so much pleasure in working with this material that I began to write my first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, because I didn't want the pleasure to end. Writing fiction was, and still is, pure pleasure. Oh, I ran out of steam from time to time. After I got to *The New Yorker*, particularly when I was working five days a week and seeing both artists and writers, I wrote less and less and almost stopped writing altogether. But then I quit *The New Yorker* in order to write. It was a genuine parting; I left fully intending never to return. But something always brought me back. I never came back five days a week, though. If I hadn't worked at *The New Yorker* there might have been more books, but I'm not sure if they would have been as good. Writing part-time forced me to write slowly, and I think I was more careful. I write much more slowly now than I used to.

INTERVIEWERS

Why? What does age do to a writer?

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MAXWELL

I think it makes you more serious. It makes you more aware of other people's lives. You see more from the inside: the troubles, the sorrow, and the unfairness. And then when you accept the idea that life is good, no matter how unlucky you are, you get a firmer insight into it.

INTERVIEWERS

What about your schedule? When do you work?

MAXWELL

Well, I don't want to be uncooperative, but are you sure you want to ask that?

INTERVIEWERS

It *is* sort of a boring question.

MAXWELL

If you have any reason in the world for wanting to know, I'll tell you... I like to work in my bathrobe and pajamas, after breakfast, until I suddenly perceive, from what's on the page in the typewriter, that I've lost my judgment. And then I stop. It's usually about twelve-thirty. But I hate getting dressed. The cleaning woman, who may not approve of it, though she's never said, my family, the elevator men, the delivery boy from Gristede's—all of them are used to seeing me in this unkempt condition. What it means to me is probably symbolic—you can have me after I've got my trousers on, but not before. When I retired from *The New Yorker* they offered me an office, which was very generous of them because they're shy on space, but I thought, "What would I do with an office at *The New Yorker*? I would have to put my trousers on and ride the subway downtown to my typewriter. No good."

INTERVIEWERS

Maybe once you got there you could strip down.

MAXWELL

I don't think it would work. It isn't the same as going

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straight from the breakfast table.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you find certain environments more conducive to good work than others?

MAXWELL

I'm just as able to work on Cape Cod as here in New York or in Westchester. I prefer small messy rooms that don't look out on anything interesting. I wrote the last two sections of *They Came Like Swallows* beside a window looking out on a tin roof. It was perfect. The roof was so boring it instantly drove me back to my typewriter.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you isolate yourself totally when you're working?

MAXWELL

I don't mind interruptions, unless there are terribly many of them. When the children were small, they came and sat on my lap and punched the keys as I did, but they soon lost interest. My younger daughter told me recently that when she was a child she thought the typewriter was a toy that I went into my room and closed the door and played with. Once when I was typing with great concentration she touched one of the releases, and the carriage shot out from under me. I roared at her, and she went and knelt like an Arab under the dining room table, with her face against the floor, and would not accept the apology that I, also kneeling like an Arab, with my face next to hers, sincerely offered. In general I don't mind domestic sounds. I find them reassuring.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you keep a notebook?

MAXWELL

No, I never have. I like the insecurity and the danger of not keeping a notebook. I've tried writing notes down on filecards, but I find I never look at them again.

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INTERVIEWERS

Do you think there's such a thing as writer's block?

MAXWELL

There's such a thing as loss of confidence.

INTERVIEWERS

Have you ever experienced it?

MAXWELL

I've come close. There was a period after I left *The New Yorker* for the first time, when I thought I knew enough about writing stories to be able to make a living by it, but it turned out that every idea I had for a story was in some way too close to home. The stories I did write weren't bought. I began to feel that my hands were tied. I guess, though, I have always believed that if the material interested me enough to want to write about it, then it was all right; it wouldn't go away and so I should just keep working on it. Updike said once, riding in a taxi—he was talking about the reviewers, who had been scolding him for not writing what they thought he ought to be writing—"All I have to go on," he said, "is something I caught a glimpse of out of the corner of my eye." That seemed a very nice way of describing the way material comes to you. That glimpse, it's all you have. I don't think a writer's block is anything more than a loss of confidence. It certainly isn't a loss of talent.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you find it gets easier or harder to write as you get older?

MAXWELL

I think it's easier when you are young. My first novel was written on a farm in Wisconsin. Very Chekhovian, that farm was. I wrote in a room that had been converted from a water tank next to the windmill. Some of the characters were derived from people living on the farm at the time, so it was a handy place to be. I would come for lunch and they would make remarks I had put in their mouths that morning. Which wasn't really mysterious, because if you are conscious of character—in

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the other sense of the word—you can't help being struck by how consistent people are in everything they do and say. I finished the book in four months, with the help of Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Elinor Wylie, and a girl on the farm who was also writing a novel. When somebody said something good we would look at each other and one of us would say, "I spit on that," meaning, "keep your hands off of it."

The farm was ten miles out of Portage, where Zona Gale* lived. Nobody reads her now or knows who she was, even, but they did then. I had known her since I was sixteen years old. She was a kind of fairy godmother to me. I took my manuscript to her. I wanted to know if I had written a novel or not. When she gave it back to me she said that she had been unable to sleep and had read until four in the morning, and then gone downstairs to her study looking for the last chapter. I was too thickheaded to understand what she was trying to tell me, and said "No, that's all there is." Twenty years after it was published I reread the book and saw the chapter she went downstairs looking for. The next novel was more difficult, and the novel after that was even more painful. By pain I don't mean the agony of writing, I mean the uncertainty of not knowing what you're going to do or how you're going to do it. It was awfully slow. One book took ten years, one four, and my last, though not very long, took two years.

INTERVIEWERS

When you write a novel, do you try to stick to the chronological narrative as you're writing, or do you jump around?

MAXWELL

I don't really depart from the "and then . . . and then" of the storyteller, but if I am lucky I know what the last sentence is going to be. And sometimes I realize that a rounded-out scene early in the novel has shut the door too soon on something. So I take part of that scene away, and use it later on in the book. It is the death of a novel to write chapters that are really short

*She was a Wisconsin novelist and playwright—her *Miss Lulu Bett* won the Pulitzer Prize.

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stories.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you have a favorite novel?

MAXWELL

I think *The Folded Leaf*. It may be for personal reasons—the whole of my youth is in it. Also, when I was working on it, in my mind's eye I kept seeing the manuscript burning in the fireplace; I was so sure nobody would be interested in it.

INTERVIEWERS

You taught for two years. Did you care much for that?

MAXWELL

I liked it. I taught freshman composition. It was lovely when you found students who responded to things you were enthusiastic about. Teaching them to punctuate properly and to analyze the periodic sentences in Matthew Arnold's "Gregarious and Slavish Instincts in Animals" was something else again. But that wasn't what drove me away from teaching. What drove me away was a silly novel by Robert Nathan called *One More Spring*, about some people who went to live in a tool shed in Central Park. The gist of the book was that life is to be lived, and, well, it is, of course. Anyway, that book made me restless with my prospects. I saw myself being promoted from assistant to associate to full professor, and then to professor emeritus, and finally being carried out in a wooden box. This was 1933, and only an idiot would have thrown up a job at that point. But I did anyway. And I floundered for several years.

INTERVIEWERS

Do you think the writing of fiction can be taught?

MAXWELL

I expect you can be taught to write a clean, decent sentence.

INTERVIEWERS

After teaching you started editing. How did you first come to

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work at *The New Yorker*?

MAXWELL

Do we have to go into *The New Yorker*? There have been all those books. The subject has been done to death, almost.

INTERVIEWERS

Maybe we could talk about it just a little.

MAXWELL

I needed a job in order to stay in New York. Eugene Saxton at *Harper's* wrote to Katharine White about me, and she astonished him by replying that there were not many openings at *The New Yorker* at that time, but that she would talk to me. This was 1936—the Depression—and nobody had heard of an opening anywhere in years. In the course of my interview with Mrs. White she asked me what salary I would require. Some knowledgeable acquaintance had told me I must ask for thirty-five dollars a week or I wouldn't be respected; so I swallowed hard and said, "Thirty-five dollars." Mrs. White smiled and said, "I expect you could live on less." I could have lived nicely on fifteen. A few days later I got a telegram from her asking me to report for work on the following Monday at the salary agreed upon—thirty-five dollars a week.

In those days—it is no longer true—fiction, humor, and art were handled by the same editors. The artists brought their work in on Tuesday and it was looked at by the Art Meeting on Wednesday afternoon. At the Art Meeting were Harold Ross, Mrs. White, Rea Irvin, Wolcott Gibbs (until he gave up his place), Mrs. White's secretary, who took notes of the proceedings, and an office boy named Wilbur, whose mind was on basketball. The editors sat on one side of a big table, with knitting needles. The covers and drawings were placed on a stand by Wilbur; Ross would lean forward and touch the parts of the drawing that were unsatisfactory with the end of his needle. I too had a knitting needle, which I did not use for quite some time. Occasionally Mrs. White would say that the picture might be saved if it had a better caption, and it would be returned to the artist or sent to E. B. White, who was a whiz at

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this. Ross would lean forward and peer at a drawing with his lower lip sticking out and say, "You can't tell who's talking." Or he would say, "Bird Rock"—a remark that mystified me until I learned that many years before this *The New Yorker* had published a drawing of a seagull standing on a rock and a man saying to another man, "They call it 'Bird Rock.' " It had become a generic term for an undesirable form of humor. A great deal of what was put before the Art Meeting was extremely unfunny. Gibbs was repelled by the whole idea of grown men using their minds in this way and seldom said anything. Rea Irvin smoked a cigar and was interested only when a drawing by Gluyas Williams appeared on the stand.

On Thursday the artists returned to find out what had happened at the Art Meeting. Someone had to convey this information to them. Gibbs felt he had been doing it long enough, and so I was taken on. It was called "seeing artists." The first time they paraded in one after another I was struck by the fact that they all looked like the people in their drawings. George Price looked like the man who floated up near the ceiling of that disreputable apartment week after week; Otto Soglow looked like his Little King. Cotton was kind and fatherly. Alajalov wore yellow kid gloves. Some artists were too important to be entrusted to me. Peter Arno and Helen Hokinson were seen by Mrs. White. I noticed that they didn't look like the characters they drew.

INTERVIEWERS

Then from the Art Meeting you graduated on to the editorial board?

MAXWELL

Yes. Only it wasn't called that. I sat in a big room where the secretaries were; there wasn't even an office for me. But it was a wonderful place to be, because I was right beside the door of Katharine White's office. She moved with majestic deliberation, and between the time she got up from her desk and the time she put her foot on the catch that released her door so that it would swing shut I learned a lot about the workings of the

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magazine. I remember when Gibbs's parody profile of Henry Luce was going to the printer. Time-Life was in an uproar about it; there was a continuous procession of people in and out of Mrs. White's office. I sat taking in snatches of the excitement.

When the door was closed I sat and worried about how long it would take them to decide it was not worthwhile to go on paying me thirty-five dollars a week. On Mondays and Fridays I had nothing whatever to do but stare at a Thurber drawing above my desk—until Mrs. White suggested that I get the scrapbooks from the office library and read them. She also gave me a pile of rejected manuscripts and asked me to write letters to go with those that showed any promise. After she had gone over my letters she called me into her office and said, "Mr. Maxwell, have you ever taught school?" It was a fact that I had kept from her in our interview: instinct told me that it was not something you were supposed to have done. Anyway, from her I learned that it is not the work of an editor to teach writers how to write.

One day Wolcott Gibbs asked me if I'd like to try some editing. He handed me a manuscript and walked away, without explaining what he meant by editing. I didn't think much of the story, so I cut and changed things around and made it the way I thought it ought to be. To my surprise Gibbs sent it to the printer that way. And I thought, "So that's editing." The next time he gave me a piece to edit I fell on my face. I straightened out something that was mildly funny only if it wasn't too clear what was going on. Gibbs was kind, and said that my editing revealed that there wasn't very much there, but I got the point. In time I came to feel that real editing means changing as little as possible. Various editors and proofreaders would put their oar in, and sometimes I had to change hats and protect the writer from his own agreeableness, or fear, or whatever it was that made him say yes when he ought to have said no. What you hope is that if the writer reads the story ten years after it is published he will not be aware that anybody has ever touched it. But it takes many years of experience—and love—to be able to do that.

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INTERVIEWERS

Why was this drawing by Thurber in front of you?

MAXWELL

It was drawn right on the wall. A self-portrait. His drawings were everywhere, all over the office. There was one drawing on the nineteenth floor by the watercooler of a man walking along happy-as-anything and around the corner a woman is waiting for him with a baseball bat, ready to swing. One night some fool painter came in and painted over every last one of them. It was a tragedy. Brendan Gill talks about how difficult Thurber was. On the other hand, there's that story of the maid at the Hotel Algonquin who was straightening up his room and found, written in shaving soap on the bathroom mirror, the words "Thurber is a bastard." For that you can forgive quite a lot. Of course, what it comes down to in the end is that an artist is loved for his work, not his sweet disposition.

INTERVIEWERS

What was the chemistry of working with Harold Ross? Why was it so exciting?

MAXWELL

It had to do with his personality. And being taken into his confidence. People don't often strike me as being larger than life-size, but he did. He was not the unintelligent oaf he has sometimes been portrayed as being. He was clearly in command of the magazine. And he saw things through a prism of humor. I remember his telling me with amusement that his mother used to touch her hair here and there with her hand before she answered the telephone. Also, he was so decent. And, up to a point, much too trusting. It was like having a terribly funny father. He had a personal relationship with everybody in the office, including Wilbur, the office boy. Once, during a period when I had left the magazine to write a novel, I met him on 43rd Street at about one o'clock, and he said, "Maxwell, what are you doing in town?" and I said, "I came in to go to the theater." It didn't occur to me to explain that my

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ticket was for the evening performance. He went on to the office and told somebody, "I met Maxwell on his way to a matinee. I don't understand it. I thought only women went to matinees." He was genuinely disturbed, and didn't know whether he was under a misapprehension about matinees or about me. What he cared most about, I think, was writers—about bringing them along. So long as they didn't try to proselytize in *The New Yorker*, it didn't matter to him what their political opinions were; it was their talent that interested him. I also think he thought that people with talent didn't in general know enough to come in out of the rain, and he was trying to hold an umbrella over them.

INTERVIEWERS

It must have bothered him terribly when those feuds began—as with O'Hara, for instance.

MAXWELL

Before the feud with O'Hara, Ross worried that O'Hara would manage to get some sexual innuendo into the magazine that the editors had failed to recognize. As he once or twice did. O'Hara as a person amused Ross. Perhaps because they were all young together. O'Hara thought up the idea (based on need) that if he turned in a story and it wasn't accepted he should be paid five hundred dollars anyway. The trouble was, O'Hara could write a story a day without half trying. So instead of the five hundred, Ross went out and bought a large, inexpensive watch and had it engraved, "To John O'Hara from *The New Yorker*." I don't know how the joke went over.

INTERVIEWERS

There's a story in Brendan Gill's book about your going out to O'Hara's house to read three manuscripts he had, and your getting terribly nervous when you disliked the first two. You liked the last. Which was the one you liked?

MAXWELL

"Imagine Kissing Pete." I think it is one of the best things

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he ever wrote. The falling out with *The New Yorker* was over the way two of O'Hara's early novels had been reviewed in the magazine. Fadiman's review of—*Butterfield 8*, I think it was—appeared under the heading "Disappointment in O'Hara," and the pun rankled. O'Hara was not of a forgiving disposition, and the feud lasted for years. I had no part in it whatever. It all went on over my head. Finally O'Hara sent word through St. Clair McKelway that he had finished three novelettes which *The New Yorker* could see if they would send an editor out to his house in Quogue to read them. I went. I must have been out of my mind. I mean, what if none of them had been right for the magazine? Fortunately, one was. At one point I had three wonderful writers all named John: John O'Hara, John Cheever, and John Updike.

INTERVIEWERS

Could you talk a little about editing those three? How does somebody deal with a writer as distinguished? O'Hara, to start with. He was so touchy, wasn't he?

MAXWELL

Not about editing. During the first period that I edited his work I barely knew him. I inherited him from Gibbs, who had given up editing entirely to take over the theater page from Robert Benchley. I was young and inexperienced as an editor, but fortunately O'Hara had a great respect for *New Yorker* editing. When his stories were collected in a book, he always followed the edited version. What I worked on was mostly the "Pal Joey" series. I knew nothing whatever about Broadway argot, and sometimes now in the middle of the night I groan, thinking about what I may have done to them, especially in the way of cutting. In later years O'Hara would occasionally say no to a suggested change. In one story the words "George Carlin said" turned up every time George Carlin opened his mouth. I suggested in the margin of the galleys that it had somewhat the appearance of a mannerism, and would he consider using "he said" here and there in the story. He wrote me a long, rather preachy letter on style. *His* style.

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Updike is an extreme perfectionist. His manuscripts are always cleanly written, and he usually makes a great many interesting changes on the galleys. When the page proofs were ready I would mail him a set and we would talk sometimes for an hour or two on the phone . . . mostly about whether this or that new change—his change, not mine—was for the better, or might possibly do some damage to the surrounding sentences. It was an education in how to refine language to the point where it almost becomes something else. The pure practised effectiveness and verve of an Olympic athlete is what it often reminded me of.

INTERVIEWERS

And Cheever?

MAXWELL

I don't know what service I provided for Cheever except to be delighted with his work. He brought me *The Country Husband* when I was sick in bed with bronchitis. I remember the rapture of reading it.

INTERVIEWERS

Did you show your own manuscripts to any of these three?

MAXWELL

No, but I did to other *New Yorker* writers. Frank O'Connor came out to our house in the country for the day, with his wife and baby, and in the course of the conversation he extracted from me the information that I had been working for eight years on a novel I was in despair over. "Let me see it," he said, and I was appalled. I was not in the habit of mixing my two lives. At that time the manuscript of what turned out to be *The Chateau* filled a good-sized grocery carton. I hadn't been able to make up my mind whether it should have an omniscient author or a first-person narrator, whether it should be told from the point of view of the French or the Americans traveling in France. I was afraid it wasn't a novel at all but a travel diary. I told O'Connor that the manuscript was in such a shape that it

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was unreadable, but he assured me that he could read anything. He had been sufficiently trusting to let me see the rough draft of section after section of *An Only Child*, and I didn't feel like saying that it was one thing for me to see his unfinished work and another for him to see mine. He went off with the grocery carton in the back seat of the car, and read through the whole mess. Then he wrote me a wonderful letter in which he said he didn't understand what I was up to. There seemed to be two novels—which he then proceeded to discuss, in detail, as separate works. My relief was immense, because it is a lot easier to make two novels into one than it is to make one out of nothing whatever. So I went ahead and finished the book.

I showed the next to final draft of *The Chateau* to Francis Steegmuller, who straightened out my wobbly French in places where corrections were called for.

Before that, at a time when I had almost stopped writing entirely, I showed what I thought was a short story to Louise Bogan, and she said it was a novel, so I kept on writing about those two characters. I sent her what I wrote, chapter by chapter, through four versions, and she never said enough is enough. From time to time I got a penny postcard from her with "v. good" or something like that on it. Once she objected to a physical description, on the ground that the writing wasn't very fresh, so I sweated over it. And another time, when I was stuck, I had a postcard from her saying, "Get that boy up off the bed on the sleeping porch." When I finished the novel she found me a title for it, from Tennyson's "The Lotus Eaters":

> Lo! in the middle of the wood
> The Folded Leaf is woo'd from out the bud
> With winds upon the branch. . .

I also, at times, showed my work to Harold Brodkey. I knew his first wife when she was a little girl, and shortly after they were married she brought him to our house and we became friends. During part of the time I was writing *The Folded Leaf* I was in analysis with Theodor Reik, who thought the book ought to have a positive ending. And Edward Aswell at *Harper's* thought the story would be strengthened if I combined some of the minor characters. I was so tired and so

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unconfident about the book that I took their word for it. Later I was sorry. And when it came out ten years later in the Vintage Press I put it back pretty much the way it was in the first place. While I was making the corrections Harold brought me a marked copy of the book. Mostly the things he objected to were ideas I had absorbed from Reik rather than arrived at from my own experience, and I either cut or rewrote those sentences. When I was working on *Ancestors* he got so interested in the structure that I showed the manuscript to him chapter by chapter, as I had with Louise Bogan. We had a running argument: what I cared about in fiction was emotion, and though he was not indifferent to emotion he thought—I hope I am quoting him correctly—that ideas mattered as much or more. They aren't, of course, mutually exclusive. But as a result of our argufying I became aware of the extra dimension that abstract thinking brings to fiction.

Now that I think of it I have always shown whatever I was working on to somebody—most often my wife, whose opinions tend to be detached and trustworthy. When I was writing *Time Will Darken It* I found that the book was proceeding by set conversations, rather like a play. A had a conversation in the back seat of the carriage with B, and as a result B had it out with C, and when C met D on the stairs she said—you get the idea. When I started a new chapter I asked myself who hadn't talked to whom lately. It's not a bad method. Anyway, when I finished a chapter I would read it to my wife, sitting outside on the grass in the sunshine, and it was like sharing news from home.

INTERVIEWERS

So you think writers are apt to be good judges of other writers' work?

MAXWELL

Well, Updike certainly seems to be a good judge. O'Hara was very good in his letters.

INTERVIEWERS

No professional jealousies? O'Hara, who was so competitive

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about his writing: if he thought for a minute you were on his level. . .

MAXWELL

I don't think he thought for a minute that I was on his level, so that was no problem. No, I don't think writers are necessarily competitive. There was a period when I thought they weren't at all. Lately they have seemed more so. In any case, I felt it was important, as an editor, to play down as much as possible the fact that I also wrote. I wanted the writers I worked with to feel that nothing was more important to me than their work. And for the three days a week that I was at my desk at *The New Yorker*, nothing was.

INTERVIEWERS

Ever since the days of O'Hara, something has endured—a *New Yorker* story. Do you agree? Is there such a thing?

MAXWELL

The usual answer from the magazine is no; they point out the range and variety of the fiction writers who have been published in *The New Yorker*. From Nancy Hale to Vladimir Nabokov is a very wide sweep. Irwin Shaw when he was a young man said once that in the typical *New Yorker* story everything occurs at one place in one time, and all the dialogue is beside the point. It was not, at the time, a wholly inaccurate description. That is to say, there were lots of stories like that. Something that *is* characteristic of the writers who appear in *The New Yorker* is that the sentence is the unit by which the story advances, not the paragraph, and the individual sentence therefore carries a great deal of weight and tends to be carefully constructed, with no loose ends. And style becomes very important. Gibbs said in a memo he wrote on the theory and practise of *New Yorker* editing—"If a writer has style, leave it."

INTERVIEWERS

That memo would be an extremely interesting document to have.

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MAXWELL

Gibbs was a wonderfully fast and expert editor. In those days *New Yorker* stories were short—twelve pages was a very long story. And he edited by cutting entire paragraphs. In some mysterious way they were not missed afterward. I never learned how to do this: instead I operated on the principle of never taking out anything I liked. After Gibbs left, the fiction began to get long, perhaps because he was not there to cut it. Or maybe it was just that the subjects that could be dealt with in twelve pages had been exhausted and writers were forced to take in more territory.

INTERVIEWERS

How did editing the work of others affect your own work?

MAXWELL

I expect it affected the quality of it, made it better. It could hardly hurt anybody to have to pay close attention, word by word, and sentence by sentence, to the work of writers such as those I mostly dealt with.

INTERVIEWERS

There was no chance of losing your own voice amidst theirs?

MAXWELL

Well, you could just as easily *find* your voice amidst theirs. The essays of E. B. White are a great help if you are trying to use the pronoun "I" in a way that is natural and unselfconscious.

INTERVIEWERS

Could you take time off to write your novels?

MAXWELL

No, not as a rule. Mostly I went on working at the office two or three days a week. It took much longer to write a novel that way, but it did allow me to pick up where I had left off with a fresh view of things. Ross heard that I had been working on a novel for four years and came into my office to talk to me about

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it. He knew that what I was working on—it was *The Folded Leaf*—was of no conceivable use to *The New Yorker*, but he didn't like the idea of a writer having to spend such a long time over something. The upshot of the conversation was that he sent me home for six months on full pay so I could finish my novel. When it was published and got good reviews, he was pleased. He felt he had a stake in the enterprise.

INTERVIEWERS

What a lovely story.

MAXWELL

Well, he was a lovely man, and it doesn't come out in the books at all. I really loved him. And two more different people than Ross and me you could hardly conceive of. There was a story, perhaps legendary, that Mrs. White so enraged him by something she said that he picked up a telephone and threw it at her. But he never even raised his voice at me.

INTERVIEWERS

Did things change when William Shawn took over as editor-in-chief?

MAXWELL

How could they not change? Gently and slowly changes have occurred. If nothing changed then the whole thing would come to an Egyptian end. Do you like Egyptian sculpture?

INTERVIEWERS

Yes. Cats.

MAXWELL

My wife loves it dearly. But when we went down the Nile I was troubled by the fact that the motifs were unchanging for two thousand years—the king of Egypt holding his enemies by the hair, in temple after temple. That's what would happen if *The New Yorker* never changed—that dead quality would creep in.

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INTERVIEWERS

Do you have any advice for writers trying to get published in *The New Yorker*?

MAXWELL

I don't think anybody can write decent fiction and at the same time try to match the requirements of a magazine—maybe, but I don't think so. You do what your heart cries out to do. In my own case, I'm often in doubt about something I've written—and I think, well, if I like it, perhaps someone else will like it too. That's the final criterion—whether or not the writer likes what he has written.

INTERVIEWERS

As an editor, in deciding whether or not to read a story, how much weight do you place on the first sentence?

MAXWELL

A great deal. And if there is nothing promising by the end of the first page there isn't likely to be in what follows. I love first sentences, anyway. When you get to the last sentence of a novel you often find that it was implicit in the first sentence, only you didn't know what it was.

INTERVIEWERS

What are some of your favorite first lines? Do you collect them?

MAXWELL

No, but offhand I think of "None of them knew the color of the sky," which is *The Open Boat* and "All the sisters lay dreaming of horses," which is *National Velvet*. And the wonderful first line of *Pride and Prejudice*. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

INTERVIEWERS

Do you spend a lot of time on your own first sentences? *So*

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Long, See You Tomorrow begins, "The gravel pit was about a mile east of town and the size of a small lake and so deep that boys of under sixteen were forbidden by their parents to swim in it."

MAXWELL

Originally the first sentence was, "Very few families escape disasters of one kind or another." When *The New Yorker* bought it, the editors were troubled by the fact that for the first twenty pages it read like reminiscence. A good many readers don't enjoy that sort of thing, and over the years *The New Yorker* had been blamed for publishing too much of it. Actually, if writers don't put down what they remember, all sorts of beautiful and moving experiences simply go down the drain forever. In any case, *The New Yorker* was afraid that readers, seeing also that it was very long, would stop reading before they discovered that it was really about a murder. So I moved things around a bit at the beginning.

INTERVIEWERS

That didn't bother you, to start at a different place?

MAXWELL

I could see that they had a point. Of course there was a certain amount of straining at the seams—any writer would feel it—but I got past that. The effect on me was as if I were shaving and some hand came and took the razor from me and did this part of my face.

INTERVIEWERS

It's nice to be shaved sometimes.

MAXWELL

And it's nice to have someone genuinely care about your work, to the point that they can do for you what you have failed to see needed doing. In my experience at *The New Yorker*, the best writers were very good-tempered about suggested changes. I can only remember one instance when the editing

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process broke down and the writer took back his story. Between the time that we had accepted it and the time we prepared the galleys, another story came in and was rejected, and I suspect that his anger over the galleys was really anger about the rejection. That was the only time. It's almost axiomatic—the more talented the writer, the easier he is to work with, if the editor is both sensitive and sensible.

INTERVIEWERS

Are you in the habit of writing every day?

MAXWELL

Yes. Seven days a week. An insane life, but what happiness! It's really self-indulgence. I resent any social invitation that keeps me up after ten-thirty, so that I'm not bright as a dollar the next morning.

INTERVIEWERS

What if you hadn't been a writer at all?

MAXWELL

I can't imagine, I really can't imagine. I would have been so deprived of everything I love if I hadn't been a writer. It would have been awful, awful.

—John Seabrook
—George Plimpton

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Two Poems by Reg Saner

Road Life

Why shouldn't you too have a woman?

Because U.S. 36 has always poured possibilities
through your hometown, you squeal smoking out of A&W
Root Beer
using acceleration for plumage, letting the road
tell you your story.

Your prospects widen and hum through Missouri
toward Colorado, farm after farm, like a C-Major chord.

At the 7-dollar Peoriana Motel in St. Joe your shower stall
proves roomy enough for even beginners
lathering each other's shoulders and groins. Daylight
for devouring cows in the corn, thunderhead Himalayas;
nighttime
for keeping her womb swimming in minnows that fishtail
upstream
hundreds of miles, coming along for the ride
through conversation turning on bodies in common
which it turns out you've married. At Marv's Conoco
in Mankato, money-numbers on the gas pump roll up their
eyes
and whirl. What a breathtaking way to buy honeymoon!

While the radio wanders thickets of cowpoke guitar
homegrown in Nebraska, both kids bicker lightly in back,
tireless as static playpenned and strapped down for travel.
The prairie goes gusting away, huffing you westerly
down a pipeline of sunsets gaudy as flags
dyed in watermelon slaughter. Sage-clumps whiz by like
chenille

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fleeing a bedspread. The Jayhawk Rock Shop & Curio Stand
keeps changing name in name only. Near Idalia's town
pump
one wind-devil filches salami clear of your sandwich
and feeds it to tumbleweed. Anne laughs
and you laugh and Tim gargles Pepsi.
Nicky skateboards brief swathes of sidewalk at Rest Stops
till wind stuffs you all back into the Chevy.
The game out of Denver is scanning through bug-splat
for the first cloud become mountain.

Overtaking Rainbo Bread your Plymouth kicks ass, roaring,
squeezing ahead of the fumes—
easier, now Tim's helping drive. Unlike yours
his mind doesn't wander. Nick cruises elf wars and gold,
unreeling *Hobbit* cassettes into his ear, dozens of counties.
Then Tim says he's had it, pulling over to put something
down
on his own machine. Staggering in the backlash of trailers
you reason irritably before giving in,
watching your firstborn shrink to nearly a man
on his own in the rearview mirror. The way a bird turns tail,
flaps a while, and dissolves.

Cruising past herds of fur money on ranches
you and Anne settle down at 65 miles an hour
to August evenings from the porch, where you drift closer
to each other, to both boys well-married, to the end of the
debts.
Because you're a blur making time
like everyone else you've had to re-invent the wheel,
the birthday, the anniversary—their innumerable one or two
ways
to turn things, hold things
that never hold still.

You speak to the Day-Glo Vest Committee of the repair
crews,

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to the flag ladies, to the whoop-and-holler of schoolkids
sucked into vanishing points on your bumper chrome.

You speak to each Stuckeys & Texaco, their marriage of
sweetness
and gas. You speak to a chicken hawk veering down slowly
into a nest of blue trees.
You startle at tires suddenly brought to a boil
over bridge floor—and at a fisherman's canvas chair, bright
yellow,
left on a sandbar.

You notice Nick noticing how shift-levers handle.

Now that the pavement's half-glaze, now that the family
travels with you by phone, the Volvo feels emptied of
traction.
A slipstream of snow rushes up and over your face.
You lean toward the windshield to sense how your future is
doing.

Climbing eastward from Glenwood Springs you follow two
eagles
where canyon wall stacks up hundreds of levels
like memoirs housed in a library
including feathered lances and shields,
warpainted bright as a boast
outside Shoshone Hydro Electric. For lunch
why not try the road's shoulder, just short of the Divide
and sentimentalize missing Indians?

With beer and pastrami you enjoy yellow rock
outcropped through snow fallen at the end of winter.
Occasional blazes of sun slur through cloud's lucent

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moments
while out-of-state plates marvel everywhichway,
enchanted with clifflines. What do the Indians say?
They say flow is their only idea, and that every lost arrow,
every bone in this canyon is happy. Douglas fir brighten,
dim, re-brighten, hovering drifts, illumined
as if roots might emit a light of their own.

Downhill out of the Eisenhower Tunnel
an Impala shoots like sperm
stuffed with young faces and hair, skis on the roof,
the driver a kid who nods, keeping time
to a rhythm he mistakes for his tapedeck
while sucking a blue cocktail stir
and hugging his girl.

How you love them, these touches only the road could
imagine!
Because the road still tells a good story
about small figures pretty much like yours
charging the horizon. And tells how, against astonishing
odds
often including themselves,
most people get where they're going. Even in the hurtle
and chinook of the vast swashbuckling diesels
you hear it. And, during hushes between,
in these small secrets being traded by birds.

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The Fifth Season

Up a ladder weightless as bird legs, thinner
than the indelible grass
where thistle leafs out, sizzling like bacon fat,
I'm re-ascending to heaven, getting back into management.

In no time I've persuaded underweight creeks to invest
themselves
in the Green, the Yampa, the San Juan, the Gunnison
as they go bandsawing deeper into their canyons
or meander flats, watering acorns I've programmed
with daydreams and applause for shorelining reservoirs.

I feed a magpie on seeds wanting to fly.
I remind burrowing prairie dogs to exchange and dissolve
into offspring. I nudge cottonwood lint across the Divide
while its tree stays behind
riffling, lacing the San Luis Valley with plankton.
I stock the sky's night waters with dim barge-loads of
turquoise
before lofting them southerly, just under the moon.

Off seasons? There are none?

I go round stuffing fresh meadows under old snow,
arrange high-country silences so comprehensive
that only in them can each smallest cony or pine finch
or pipit
take its place and be heard.

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I make certain no note is lost. I traffic in light
the eye has not seen.

Out of stumps and trunks and fallen limbs moldered,
out of the white-bellied slugs, out of silver leaves
trilling sage stalks; out of bindweed
scribbling its inexhaustible phrases, the sulphur-flowers
yellowing wind, the daytime galaxies thicker than powder,
quicker than number; out of pollen scum
dusting pools in the rock,
out of the four suns of Colorado's four seasons
I send a fifth season up in its skies, rising always.

Is my ladder still there? One rung at a time
I begin to step out of heaven, a cloud's possibilities
descending, as if some pure volunteer–or common starling
dead in mid-flight,
flashing dark color off preen oil
in wings barely stirring, whispering
ever so lightly as its slow turn falls
perfectly aimed
through air's open doors
toward the exuberant wreckage of August.

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On Dying

R. Michael Benson

It's a bad day for all the niggers in the classroom. We don't really give a good rat's ass where the hell the Great Salt Lake is, so Purvis sticks it just outside of New Rochelle. And Densil think that 6 × 8 is the height of the power forward for the New York Knickerbockers, which is why they ain't worth shit either, not even worth the Boston Celtics. And an amoeba is a social disease, at least Corneil's big sister contracted it and has to go uptown three times a week for needles and doctors looking inside her all the time with real skinny flashlights and rubber gloves.

So Mrs. Pettitt Manderson just looks at us real stern and begins tapping her foot and announces, "All right, class. You may proceed to the cupboards, select your pillows, and rest your overworked brains on your desktops for a period of thirty minutes. The nurse will come in with cookies and milk."

Well, I think big fucking deal. Cookies and milk again! And resting my brain after it's already been rested ten hours the night before because Eveline had to put me to bed early just in

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case the old man came home wasted again. It don't do me no good anyway.

So I just stands up in the back row, goes *piiinnnggggggg* like from the Civil War, and drop dead on the floor.

"Lester's dead again," say some white chick.

It's Jessica Bradford, God's gift from busing, and she's straddling above me and tattling like the usual goddamn honky. I know it's her because above the pale, freckled legs she's wearing light blue underwear with her name written on the tag, as if some nigger ever gonna steal them.

Mrs. Pettitt Manderson groans, "Not again."

Except it is. I die a very lot. And I like it, almost better than I do staying alive. You take last year's Christmas photos that we've got sitting on the television set that don't work, even though they's blurred and out of focus because the old man's shot them. Eveline actually had boughten this big motherfucking white man's fir tree, so whenever we turned on the bulbs, all the cockroaches come scampering out and underneath the presents . . . that there ain't much of. So it's unplugged for the photos. But, in the front of the photos, with big white teeth like a piano keyboard, and thick eyeglasses, and no boyfriend ever standing behind her, there's my stepsister, Queen Agnes, her Fagness, except for she scream bloody murder if she ever hear me saying that. (But it's okay to write.) She was unwrapping stockings, and pomade that make her hair stay flat like a honky's, and acting like she enjoyed it. Way in the back of the photos, that's me, stone dead, these two little black boy legs and slippers thrust out underneath the tinsel and ribbons, and twitching . . . if it were home movies. I mean, hell, I might as well been dead; Eveline bought me some baby mittens again with the little suspenders attached to the sleeves, and she promised me I'd get stuck with them next Christmas too if I didn't stop losing them all the time. At least the old man stole me an electric train and tracks, except for he couldn't get no electric part and Eveline weren't gonna allow anything dishonest in the house anyway.

So I have lots of practice at dying. I leave my mouth wide open, and even a stream of drool—I mean, blood—come seep-

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ing out. Jessica spread her hankie out on the floor, so I don't catch lockjaw off all the footsteps.

Leaning over me and taking my pulse, Mrs. Pettitt Manderson say, "This job just isn't worth seven thousand dollars a year, Lester."

"For me, ain't worth no hundred and eighty-two days a year either," I answer.

"This is the fourth time you've died this year. Lester, what am I going to do with you?"

"Bury me."

"What?"

"You can take us all out to recess and bury me."

"I can't do that, Lester. You have a pulse. You're not legally dead."

"What if I holds my breath some?"

There ain't a single nigger with his head down on his desk and resting their brains, just honkies that don't need to anyway. So it's gonna go down in my files that a dead man's been disrupting the class again. Mrs. Pettitt Manderson, just in case, start shooing away all the breathing niggers like flies to give me fresh air. Bent over, them honky women sure do smell good in the morning. Ain't no one else in their showers (except Mr. Pettitt Manderson), so they smells like pink soap and linen and those sprays they squirt underneath and in between, like in the magazine advertisements, before walking through the meadows and the flowers with some fine gentleman.

"Jessica," she finally orders. "Please find Lester's sister."

"Yes, Mrs. Pettitt Manderson."

Queen Agnes, her Fagness, sure gonna love that, being fetched out by a honky in front of the sixth grade. Inside, she gonna bubble, "Hot shit, this honky comin' to gets me, honey." But, outside, where she's all white, she'll just say calm and polite, "Certainly, Jessica." That is, until she learn what it for, that her little brother just gone down dead on the floor again. Then all shit is gonna break loose.

The truth is that Queen Agnes, her Fagness, and me, we get along just about never. The problem is that she even more white than Eveline. Like being the only nigger faces in an entire gymnasium for Wednesday night ballroom dancing, that was

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Queen Agnes, her Fagness's work. First time they signed me up, and I saw those wall-to-wall honkies in pink dresses lined up on fold-down chairs, I just about died. In fact, I did. Right underneath the basketball net when the music started. And I was sure dressed for it, all stiff and black in my Sunday church suit and the carnation pulled out of my buttonhole and resting on my stomach.

But Agnes, her Fagness, told Eveline that she was just mortified, watching all those white people giggling and steering past me, and the beginners were none too good at that. And, worse, no one would dance with her because I embarrassed them so. Never even occurred to her, it being because she were a nigger. So Eveline told me she paid decent money, seven dollars and fifteen cents to Goodwill, for that suit, and if I weren't gonna wear it sitting in church but being a no-account like my old man, then I was gonna wear it dancing. I had my choice—church or dancing.

So I chose dancing.

But only because I was working up this plan. Next Wednesday, there was Queen Agnes, her Fagness, in a blue skirt and wrinkling, falling-down stockings, and me, feeling like a slab of black cardboard in that suit, riding the 125th Avenue subway with the rest of the niggers.

Two of the nigger sonuvabitches across from us, in old baggy overalls and with three teeth between them, dared to say to me, "Who are you, boy? Guy Lombardo?"

I leaned toward the Queen. "I know a secret," I says.

"Don't care," she answered.

"You care about this one . . . 'cause it's about you."

"What?" she blurted.

But I just gazed out the window. Outdoors, the lights were flashing, and the wooden platforms zipped by, always with niggers stuck on them and going nowhere, as far as the eye could see. The trash kicked up around the tracks.

"You tell me, Lester."

"Don't matter. It just something some honky boy say in gym."

"What?" she popped, like a pimple.

"You know, just that mushy stuff that white boys say."

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"You tell me, Lester, or I gonna bite out your eyes!"

"Well, he just fixing to dance some with you. That's all."

But that were sure more than enough for her. Right away, the Queen went to bossing the niggers on the subway. She made them fasten up the windows, so her hair wouldn't blow and kink none. Then she turned to painting and powdering her reflection in the window glass.

When we got to the school, they were already tuning up the record player, and these little twinges of waltzes came out in spurts. As they unlocked the iron gate and we passed through, a light drizzle began to fall. Poof, like an electric socket, the pomade gave out, and all the Queen's hair frizzled up again. She bolted through the doorway.

When I entered, she was trying to paste down her hair again and saying "Shit!" because it kept on bursting out.

"Use spit," I said.

She sneered.

"I gots some."

"Lester, you tell me which white boy he is."

"Can't. I promised him. It's a secret."

"Then do I like him?"

"Better than any."

"Oooooooohhhhhhhh."

She shot up the stairway, didn't even bother to shuffle on across that gymnasium floor, and just about lifted this honky bitch right out of the center chair. Then she slid it forward to get that extra inch closer to the boys. The fat lady hunked at the foul line and whispered into the microphone something like "Gentlemen, start your engines," and they sped across the dance floor.

I was still climbing up the stairs, so I gots a running start on them. It were easy to find the Queen, the black face all craned up and her eyeglasses bugged out and looking around like periscopes. So I stepped right up in front of her, and I bowed.

"Queen Agnes, her Fagness, I's taking this dance."

She blinked. "But you ain't white?"

"You ain't either," I answered.

"You go 'way."

"No."

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"Please."

"This nigger ain't dancing," I shouted.

And the whole place went stone silent until they learned it were a real nigger talking. The Queen, she got humiliated and set her head down between her knees and messed up that fine ebony hair. And the fat lady, playing it like a white man, say, "Now, Agnes, you must dance with the young lad."

She didn't like it none, not the first dance, not the second, not the third, not even the fourth. But it didn't harm me as much as I had thought. The Queen was a whole lot taller than me, so I was staring all the time right into where her titties weren't. It became kinda like driving might be, except she had no side mirrors. So I would signal for a left turn at each end of the dance floor. And I'd honk every now and then when we bore down upon a congestion of whities gabbing at center court.

Finally she confessed, almost with tears beading on her eyeglasses, "I could just die."

"And so can I," I said, "if you promise never to tell Eveline."

We struck the deal during the "Moonlight Sonata."

She wound up sitting on a fold-down aluminum chair in the corner every dance for six and a half months, while the honkies in their pinks and blues and greens glided and stumbled across the dance floor. And I got the best of the deal; I went out on the breezeway each Wednesday night and died. Couple stories up like that in the wind, the city ain't half that bad. Through the fire escapes and the clotheslines on nights when I died with my eyes open, they was always a trace of gray clouds and sometimes a slice of moon too that wouldn't get lost in the neons. One night even, the old man dropped by to see how well I was boogying with my honkies. Eventually, he worked his way out to the breezeway, set down his Jim Beam in the paper sack, and died for about ten minutes beside me. He laughed a lot, and said I was the smartest young buck for tricking the Queen and Eveline like I did. And after that, he did the neatest thing with the sky. He'd say, "You see dat cloud over de Winston billboard, son. I passing it on to ya." And, sure enough, she'd come floating on right above me.

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For the Queen, we never really felt that sorry, her not being family but coming along in the deal with Eveline. I don't feel sorry for her even now, walking through the classroom door with all her hopes up, then finding it's nothing important but her stepbrother sprawled on the floor again. With the Queen, I close my eyes for this dead part a bit.

She say, "Shit, nigger."

All the honky heads lift up off the pillows and the desktops.

Mrs. Pettitt Manderson scolds, "Agnes."

"Sorry, ma'am." And she corrects herself. "Lester, dear, what are you doing on that dirty floor?"

"Dying," says Jessica.

"I wish," say the Queen.

"Me too," I add.

"How do we revive him, Agnes?" Mrs. Pettitt Manderson asks.

"I can beats on him and kick him some."

"Agnes."

"Mama can't sue you. You hits the nigger right on the curly part of the head where it leaves no marks. Then he can't prove nothin' in the courts."

"Agnes, in this school, we deplore acts of violence. There must be better methods. What do you do when he dies at home?"

"He wouldn't dare."

"Why not?"

"They beat me," I says.

"Eveline whoop the living fire out of him if he die on the floor in his school clothes."

"Well, thank you, Agnes. I think we will just ignore Lester until he becomes bored of being dead."

"Ain't going to work none."

"We'll see. There must be something in the classroom, perhaps, that will interest him and convince him to join us."

"Current History," suggests Jessica.

"Yes, Current History."

So Mrs. Pettitt Manderson escorts the Queen to the door and out of the second grade, but not before Her Fagness give a good stomp right on my little finger. That bring open the eyes, all

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right, and I have to bite down on my lips to not come up screaming like a nigger in church. And almost again during Current History because it's such a goddamn trip when the niggers fuck it up. I mean, Mrs. Pettitt Manderson stick up this color photograph with "The President" writ across the top, and underneath this one honky dude with big nigger yellow teeth, which means he's one of those Southern families that's been dipping into the nigger slave chicks now and then.

She asks, "And who is this great man, Jessica?"

"Jimmy Carter."

"Correct. . . . Isn't that interesting, Lester?"

"Nope."

"And who is Jimmy Carter, Leon?"

"Some honky."

She grimaces like the first day they hauled her crosstown to a mostly-nigger classroom. But she hangs in there and flips up another one, this wrinkled thing like a donkey without blood which is written across the top, "Miss Lillian."

"And who's this, Cedric?"

"Another honky."

"And this?" she gulps, holding one called "Fritz Mondale."

"One more honky," says Dion.

"Well, class, in that case, perhaps you would be more excited by show and tell."

"We didn't bring anything," moans Jessica.

"I did," says Lionel. "I brought my pecker. Wanna see it?"

That's it. You figure this one. Lionel's up in front of the class and working down his zipper, and I'm quiet and dead on the floor, but I'm the one who gets blamed. I mean, I started it. So I'm passed on to these two big honky girls, sixth graders, hall monitors, they was called, who get to wear those plastic police badges above their right titties and patrol the hallways because they's too smart to be taking examinations with the rest of the niggers. I swear Queen Agnes, her Fagness, would have shit in public, in a Dixie cup, to become one of them. They do a pretty good job, though. In their entire history, only Hector Montoya ever snucked outside on them, and he was this old retarded dude in Special Education classes, so they thought he was a

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parent. Anyway, as soon as he made it over the fences and into the streets, he got wasted by a furniture truck, blotto. That didn't matter none because he was bound to get it somewhere, someway, someday, and thank God it weren't inside the school, like during Industrial Arts class inside one of the lathes. At least, that's how the Montoyas thought because they didn't sue or nothing. Eveline said she would have, even if it were me they got. But the Montoyas was just dumb Mexicans and accepted a funeral. It was neat. They scraped old Hector off the asphalt and gave him one of those cremations because they couldn't put him back together again. The whole school skipped last period to watch him be buried inside this amber bottle that was carried to the altar by the entire six hall monitors. It was bitching as hell, and for awhile I thought that when I was wasted, I wanted to get cooked too and go in style in one of the old man's Jim Beam bottles . . . except he talked me out of it when he told me sometimes he gets paid sixteen cents for returning the empties and to remember we still needed electricity for that electric train.

Besides, the way I'm going now ain't none too bad either. One hall monitor, she's toting me by the feet, and the other grips me by the armpits, and I'm all sagged down in the middle as they lug me through the hallway. What I am is kinda like one of them *Ramar of the Jungle* movies, which always start out with some big honky hunter, this sweet pretty honky lady who can't swim, and some punk honky husband who's got money, and then a whole shitload of niggers in loincloths who carry all their luggage and provides a whole lot of excitement by getting dead by lions and poison darts and footbridges over deep gorges that collapse until the honky hunter and the honky m'em sahib has enough time to fall in love while the punk honky husband sinks away in the quicksand. Me, I's one of the dudes who come across this skull stuck on a spear in the jungle trail and got chickenshit and ran away and later was captured, and now the natives are carrying me, dead and strung out on a pole, to dinner.

But, this time, I only make it as far as the principal's office. Mr. Rafferty is there, pacing in between his bookcases that ain't never read but make him look smart. I don't see him because

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my eyes is closed again. But I hear him. He's honky. He jingles all the time 'cause he got a lot of money in his pockets.

He orders, "Put him on the couch, girls."

"Yes, sir."

"How long has he been dead?"

"Fifteen minutes now."

"Except he's not really dead," says the other hall monitor, "because he keeps saying 'bwanah' and 'm'em sahib.' "

"You hear that, Lester?" asks Mr. Rafferty.

"Fuck no. I's dead," I answer.

He coughs and dismisses the honky meat, which goes giggling and tittering down the hallway. I open my eyes some. Dead men do that. Hector Montoya did, the one that was still left inside the socket. Sometimes even, the undertaker gotta come in and close them because they're stuck open and looking around all over the place, and the family ain't got no balls.

As I lay face up, it's nice to check out the office, upside down. It sure better than any classroom. Ain't no plaster peeled from the ceiling like at home. Ain't even a cobweb or a roach part mashed in the corner. There's even this nice bronze plaque, polished, which read "in memory of," and got Hector's febe picture on it before he was squooshed. I wonder if I ever get nailed up there too.

But, forget that, and all that shit about deploring acts of violence, because I'm gonna get one. I gonna get my black ass whooped with a paddle. That is, until he work down my trousers and sees Eveline can't afford me no underwear and the welts that's already there. That stops him. That makes him sit down and shake his head. He even curses. For a while, he can't even look at my paperwork. And it's not because it's pretty thick.

Then he says, "This is the third time you've died," coughing.

"Fourth," I correct.

"It's not listed here."

"I know. That time, Mrs. Pettitt Manderson took me to sixth grade Health class. She said she was gonna make some honky bitch to breathe into my mouth instead of the dummy. That got me up."

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"I see."

"Except it won't work now. They's doing Art Appreciation. The Queen's got one of hers taped to the refrigerator."

"Oh.... Then, in total," he reasons, "you've been dead for thirty-six minutes, with no oxygen to the brain. If you ever decide to come back to us, son, you're going to be like Hector Montoya."

I shut up.

"Lester?"

"Hey, man, I's dead. I ain't talking no more."

"Is that so? And what if I decide to telephone your mother? I have to do that, you know."

Rigor mortis is setting in. My left arm, it shoots up straight.

"All right. What's the number?"

"737-6398."

"Thank you."

He dials, with a zero in front for an outside line. Calling Eveline, ain't that a goddamn trip. I hear the ringing because he tilts the phone away from his ear. It take a long time to answer because Eveline's probably scrubbing the hallways, and the old man's collapsed in bed, drunk.

"Mrs. Greene?"

Yup, we still got a color, with an "e" on the end, for a last name, like most niggers.

But Eveline says real proud and loud and white, "Speaking."

"This is James Rafferty, Trevor Howard Grade School."

Then she turns real nigger. "What he do?"

"Well, he's dead."

"Ooooooohhhhh, Lordy," she screamed. "We ain't no Mexicans, honky. We gonna sue."

"No, no, Mrs. Greene. Not that way. He's faking it."

"Well, he has a nerve. I ain't faking it. He made his mama shit in her pants."

"Could you come to the school, please? We can't bring him to."

"We's coming. You leaves our subway fare on your desk."

Waiting for Eveline ain't ever been easy. Now and then, something happens in the office. Mr. Rafferty's stomach growls

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a lot, so he has our cookies and milk, which we never ate, even though he do offer me one. And they have to send home this third-grade nigger who got epilepsy and spit on the floor and made all the honkies laugh. He still has a pencil bit off in his mouth. And then they was this sixth-grade honky girl, I don't know why it happen, but she made blood underneath and started crying, and he weren't gonna tell her why, it being against the law to do so, so they sent home for her mother, who it ended up wouldn't tell her either.

Gradually, Eveline arrives. I knows it before she launches through the doorway. In the hallways, I can hear her balancing and squeaking and clicking in her high-heeled shoes. Then, in the outer office, they's the sound of her kissing the honkies' ass, "Hello, pretty white girl," "And hello there, handsome white boy." Then, finally, "Lester!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Greene," says Mr. Rafferty. "And Mr. Greene too, I assume."

My eyes stay open for good now. Yup, the old man's here. He's wearing his blue sneakers and work clothes in case he ever decide to do any. But don't count on it, him having that Jim Beam bottle wadded up in the paper sack in his back pocket. Eveline's done up in her very best, even though it don't fit, in her polka dot dress that she won at bingo.

"Mrs. Green, your son. . ."

But she cut short Mr. Rafferty. "He ain't my son. He's just some nigger bastard that Horace had."

"I see. I'm sorry." He's definitely confused and, I think, wondering whether he should have brung her here, because he goes scratching on his bald part which got red and removing his wire glasses, which he don't need to because you can't miss Eveline bloated there even if you're dead. "We can't seem to, well, wake him up," he continues.

"That easy. You's just doing it wrong. Didn't you ask of Agnes?"

"No."

"All's you gotta do is whip the black shit outta the little bastard. He get up."

And she takes hold of that paddle so tight that her knuckles burst white. This time, though, I ain't getting up. I grit my

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teeth for it and swallow because, Jesus God, I want to get it over with. Things ain't worth living at home. And not much goes right in school. So I might as well be dead. I want to see the clouds and even them no good honky angels, and hear Bessie Davis singing the gospel and "The Saints Come Marching In." And I may even dance to it too, like I learned to with the Queen.

Eveline manages to strike me one big jolt that almost cracks me to the skies . . . before Mr. Rafferty up and seize onto her. She's a big woman, and her arms go jiggling in the hangy-down parts and her boobs heave and fall underneath her bingo dress that's already broke out in a sweat.

"Mrs. Greene," he says.

"You beat him," she repeats.

"No, Mrs. Greene," he pleads, and shoves her back against the wall and underneath Hector.

"I do it," she continues. "That way, he's back on his feet and inside the classroom, and learning something from all the nice white children like Agnes do."

"Please."

Mr. Rafferty's a strong white dude for a little fellow in a tweed suit. He's got her braced up against the wall like an insect in a glass case with a pin jabbed through it. One of the hall monitors has to come inside and help.

It's then, real slow, that the old man move over to me. He stoops over and touch my forehead that's broke out and wet. His hands is hard from working a real long time ago and growing sick of it. He pull the bottle of Jim Beam from his back pocket.

"Ya take some," he says.

I shake my head.

"C'mon, boy. Ya seen it when the television used to work. A man, before he die, they lift up his head and he have a last drink. Makes it a whole lot easier to come upon da Lord with a shot in ya gut."

"I'm already dead, Papa."

"Then ya back up the time some . . . and swallow."

"Okay."

While the rest of them, except the old man, freeze then gape

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like an entire bug collection, I take a hit. It's hotter than piss, and taste like it, not that I've tried any lately. And, once more, it feels like it's gonna melt my throat and lights fire inside my gut. And I'm almost certain that I will die this time.

But I catch my breatch again and say, "Papa?"

"Yes, boy."

"Can't we back it up even more?"

"What?"

"Time. Like that night you moved the clouds, forward. Can't we back it up, time, the other way . . . before the Queen . . . before Eveline came?"

"Oooooooh, son."

"Papa."

"I just don't know 'bout that. Ya has to understand. She draw the welfare. She make all de money."

I go back down again, dead. He walk over to the grilled window. He stands there the longest goddamn time and breathes heavy and sighs. It ain't easy, looking out, I swear to that. Outdoors, they's the old nigger standing at the gate, and he don't get shit for it, not no seven thousand dollars. And, further on, they's others probably hefting up trash and sweeping. They get less. But most of them, they's just hunched over on some stoop and doing the dope and the booze and flinging the shit.

Then he shakes his head.

"Ya won't die no more?" he says, slow.

"Won't have to, Papa."

"Shit, boy."

Then he grab me in his big hand and lift me up. Eveline, against the wall, with her mouth dropped open, she looks as febe as Hector on top of her. The old man shakes hands with Mr. Rafferty. Then we walk outside the door, and the gates, and into the streets.

To this day, I remember how he left the empty on the floor.

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Six Poems by Milo De Angelis

translated by Lawrence Venuti

Gee

A child pointed at the sky, made it his,
and then he points at the one he loves
and suddenly it's his sky,

because if he does not seize it's out of love
out of the living, humble hand
which knows, recognizes the theft
but doesn't ask forgiveness, and loves:

he beautifies nothing, does not expect
act after act, always more present here
near his wool, his sweater. . .

now, on the sand,
in the human circle round the clothes
the water that invites swimming
doesn't wait, is not old
and finally the tender gesture
that one receives in the waves
is not just for him.

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Now

This desired caress, stopped
close by, will not reach the cheek, gossip
that holds no truth: better
the Nazi gesture that crushes his mind, mine.
Not comprehended
it will comprehend everything
with the struggle in the room, the imploring
look and then:
listen to me
it helps. The day escaped into the next one
to forget. Now
in a few awkward tears
it is put before you: you are contemporary.

The Sounds That Arrived

The wolf is still under the blanket
and a thousand questions are needed to grasp it
even if the desire
is to believe in everything at once
uttering a quiet, intense thanks
the unity of the sand, the right hand touching
the luminous left on the Egyptian statues
a calm that remains,
blooms again in the rite, this June
it's like an answered prayer
the teacher, the scales
and the hair color is in the womb
and then the golden instant,
the lemon's dark green.

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The Window

In the hotel
room, behind the curtains
that show a subdued square
for the first time
"I would only like to repeat, you know, nothing else"
this afternoon
it's impersonal, does not apply to anyone
does not select, is already a land
full of guests, who complete
its started work
in someone else
as that bridge stays there
calm, no longer
what unites two banks.

Only

Only this growing
indifferent to the glance and full
of what one has seen
was possible: if there are
two boats
it isn't their meeting point that matters, but the beauty
of the journey in the water: only this way,
only now, don't explain.
And it's cruel
but you must say no to his face
that weeps and doesn't understand, and loves
as people have loved for millennia, vowing
to a dark balcony, stroking themselves
among the threatening leaves.

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Anywhere Except

Talk to someone

and he answers, it's something different but
he answers: no one would forgive him
if he comes back ice, the being identical to himself
who does not walk.

He answers, answers

He's inside, he must continue, at an infinite
rate, like a word
discovered with other words
he must talk, must bathe in a river
that is not his but keeps him alive, and has no banks.

And on this country road
the girl takes off her sweater, lowers the seat
and doesn't know whether they are two, three, or she is alone
but she continues, feels the dampness, moves her muscles

"*please stay inside me*"
"are you sure?"
"yes, I want you inside, I love you."

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Islands

Michael McGuire

Characters: ED & JOANNE, a mid-western couple.
ART & ELLEN, a somewhat older, more sophisticated couple.
Setting: A hot empty beach on an island in the Pacific.
Time: Shortly before sunset.

[ARTHUR, *in shirt, shorts, sun hat and dark glasses, stands in the shade of a palm.* ED, *in swim suit, faces him. Enter* ELLEN *in bikini.*]

ART: Look at Ellen, Ed. Have you ever seen such a complete and perfect tan? A body like brown sugar. She melts. Show us your bottom, Ellen.

ELLEN: Why don't you sit down, Arthur? You look like the last white man standing there.

ART: You know I don't like the sand all over my body. This is a public beach.

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ELLEN: Yes, my love. But we're not in San Diego. Not in Detroit. This is Pago Pago.
ED: This isn't . . .
ELLEN [*Interrupting*]: It isn't? Then where the hell are we? Fiji? Samoa? There was a guarantee, you know. A certain number of islands.
ART: We are on an island in the western hemisphere.
ELLEN: Yeah. Thank God we own the place. What shall we call it, damn it, Ed? Little America?
ART: Shades of Douglas MacArthur. Shades of those who never returned.
ELLEN: I wonder how many fell on this very beach. Remember those pictures in *Life*: the first American war dead, the boys half buried in the sand? Remember?
ART: No.
ELLEN [*Looking around*]: But where the hell are the natives?
ED: They've been relocated.
ELLEN: We really do own the place.
ART [*To* ED]: You're as handsome as a god standing there. Isn't he, Ellen? An American god.
ELLEN [*Ignoring* ART, *but not* ED]: No colorful savages. No poor naked children with flies in their eyes. Really, you should have seen yourselves. Under this sky. Two men on a beach, waving tiny arms, raising inaudible voices. What is it this time? You haven't been together a week. Already you're fighting like lovers. And Arthur told me you were such friends.
ED: We were.
[*Slight pause.*]
ELLEN: I'm sure we can work it out. Is it possible?
ART: I hope so.
ELLEN: I hope so too. Don't . . . don't disappear on us, Ed.
[*Slight pause.*]
ART: How quickly the sun sets here. I can see it moving. Any minute now I'm going to come out from under this tree, harmless creature that I am. As soon as this perfect day turns into one more perfect night.
ELLEN [*To* ED *about* ART]: Wouldn't he make a nice ivory bookend standing there?

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ART: Ed was asleep. He'd fallen asleep in the sun. I didn't want him to burn. I warned him he might be . . . missing opportunities. I quoted Emerson: "Take what you want and pay for it."
ELLEN: You must forgive Arthur, Ed. Arthur thinks the world is full of prostitutes. An illusion from his army days. You see, Arthur and I are explorers. Together we explore the smaller, meaner aspects of human nature. I just smooth the way for him like a snail. A big wet snail.
ART: You're disgusting.
ELLEN: I know. And, believe me, I don't like it. No one likes to be disgusting—especially if she's a normal sensitive woman at other times.
ART: But the years are long. They take us and twist us until *we're hardly recognizable. We wouldn't know our best friends.* I remember when you wrote poems and painted pictures, Ed. I remember when we talked all night.
ED: So? [*Slight pause.*] What did we talk about?
ART: Life. Don't you remember? Life and literature and art. Mankind and history.
ED: We talked about Joanne.

[*A sudden silence, slight pause.* ELLEN *goes to the ice bucket.*]

ELLEN: What happened to the ice?
ART: It melted.
ELLEN: I thought I told you to get more.
ART: I did. It melted too.
ELLEN: There are bugs in here.
ART: I can't help it. They fall from the trees.
ELLEN [*Disgusted*]: They're breeding!
ART: What Ellen is trying to say, Ed, is that we've been planning this trip for years. Ellen was going to study marine life.
ELLEN: But there was no marine life.
ART: I was going to catch up on my reading.
ELLEN: But his books went to Easter Island. Now they follow us around, always one hop behind us.
ART: We were going to rediscover ourselves, build a new life.
ELLEN: Out of driftwood. Something natural. [*Slight pause.*

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To ED.] We're not very funny, are we? Only businessmen would laugh, businessmen and lawyers, possibly doctors. [*Softly.*] Don't go, Ed. This is a routine we do for you. It's all right if you laugh at us.

ART: I wish you wouldn't eye the bottle so self-consciously, Ellen. It's all right to drink from the bottle. No one will think you're an alcoholic.

ELLEN [*Picking up bottle*]: To be an alcoholic today would only be quaint and charming. [*Sipping.*] I'm leaving Arthur, Ed, when we get back. I thought you'd like to know. Yes, I'm flying to London for fourteen days. [*Sitting.*] Picture that: Wifles let loose at last; Wifles swimming up the Thames at low tide, mud on her breasts.

[*She lies down. Suddenly* ART *steps out.*]

ART: How delicately the horizon quivers, the sea excited by the sky. We will sit here like the last men watching the last sunset. [*The sun sets.*] Ah, there he goes. For the ten millionth time he enters her. I wonder: is he tired of her yet? [*The light quickly fades. Softly.*] Sudden thick tropical darkness, the night like velvet. We have escaped. We're free—like animals in the jungle.

[*The trees are suddenly lit with bright colored lights.* ED *laughs heartily.*]

ELLEN: What a beautiful laugh! What a lovely strong laugh! [*Suddenly earnest.*] Don't despise us, Ed, because we're loud, loud, because we're loud, because we make ourselves ugly. Don't write us off because we misbehave. Underneath . . . why, I might be Mary Pickford when she plays the little rich girl who has never seen evil and the little poor girl who kills the wife—all in the same picture. Two women in one, Ed. Two girls. I might be two. At least two . . .

[ARTHUR, *who has approached silently, pours a handful of sand on* ELLEN'S *back, sits by her and continues pouring single handfuls of sand over her.*]

ART: I hope you'll forgive this behavior, Ed. My seeing you again, after so many years, has had some effect on her.

ED: Was she different before?

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ART: Before?
ED: Before she knew you.
ART: How would I know? The years make messes of us all.
ED: You didn't used to talk like that.
ART: Didn't I?
ED: No.
ART: Perhaps I just used other words.
ED: You don't remember really. You don't know who you were then.
ART: Do *you*? It takes about six weeks to forget, doesn't it? To forget anything. Then, meeting on the street, it is impossible for both to remember both told the same lie at the same time once. Impossible, Ed. Impossible.
ED: Is it?
ELLEN [*Looking out to sea*]: What's that?
ART: What?
ELLEN: That shadow on the horizon.
ART: I don't know. [*Looking through binoculars.*] What is it?
ED: A ship without lights.
ELLEN: A warship!
ED: Yes.
ART: The American presence. We are not alone. Can you make her out?
ED: Possibly a carrier.
ART: Aha! *The Enterprise.* We're drawing a line through this spot now. Quite a retreat from the Asian mainland. But we must defend our way of life—wherever we find it. Ladies and gentlemen, we are standing on a domino.

[*Slight pause.*]

ED: I wish there was some way to remind you.
ART: I don't need reminding. I know you were there. You never saw quite what. . . what we saw. Or maybe you did, and were silent. But you had a great heart, Ed—like a stallion who would run himself into the ground for you. Those were beautiful long days, weren't they? We were two, no three, three dreamers. We wanted you with us. We still do.
ED: Joanne is my wife. She's been my wife all this time.

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ART: You've slept together. Yes, the Van Winkles have slept for just about twenty years, I'd say.
ED: And now that it's convenient, you're going to wake us up?
ELLEN [*Not moving*]: Just like he did before, Ed, when he took you in his hands and moulded this strong silent man out of common clay. I know that's how it was. Arthur told me how he took this malleable great youth in his hands. . .
ART: Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, but Ellen's dreamed about you. Yes, she cried out. . .
ED: Don't tell me.
ART: Isn't she lovely lying here? The proportions of a goddess. Have you noticed her. . .
ED [*Interrupting*]: Ellen is your wife. Joanne is mine.
ART: Yes. How primitive. We are savages, aren't we, Ed? Colorful savages. But there are privileges which accrue to the conquering tribe, this race of winners. And even savages can be friends.
ED [*Leaving*]: I thought so too.
ART [*At him as he goes*]: You'll think so again.
[*Pause.* ARTHUR *is still pouring slow handfuls of sand on* ELLEN.]
ART [*Reciting softly*]:

"Lo! 't is a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!
An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,
Sit in a theatre, to see
A play of hopes and fears."

[*Slight pause.*]
ELLEN: Go on.
ART: That's all for now.
ELLEN [*Wiggling*]: Look! I can still move. You haven't buried me yet, Arthur. [*Both laugh softly.*] Tell me, do you dig people out as well? [*Slight pause.*] Isn't it a luxury, this life?
ART: Enjoy your walk?
ELLEN: No. Too many couples, couples from the plane. I recognized the handbags, shoes kicked off in the sand, legs extend-

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ing from the undergrowth.

ART: Just marriages being saved, Ellen. As they were initiated.

ELLEN: But we're not animals, are we? Sophisticated animals. [*Glancing at him.*] Talking animals. [*Lowering her head again.*] I'm sorry if I've been misbehaving.

ART: It's all right.

ELLEN: I mean it. I'm sorry.

ART: It's perfectly all right. I understand.

ELLEN: You know...whatever you want to do, want me to do...

ART: I know.

ELLEN: Shall I be quiet for a while?

ART: Yes.

[*Slight pause.*]

ELLEN: She can't stand this sun either, can she? Doesn't she know it's set? Is she still curled up under her air conditioner, the goose bumps rising on her thighs? She's like some rare tropical flower that only opens at night. You've done well for yourself this time. I know: words don't help. I'll be quiet. I'll let you wait in peace. [*Slight pause.*] Just tell me where you're going to meet her, Arthur. Just tell me the backdrop you've chosen. Are you sure it isn't too much: seeing yourselves under this sky? Remember the others?

ART: I hardly remember you, my dear. I rediscover you each day.

ELLEN: We're enjoying ourselves this time, aren't we?

ART: Oh yes, four abreast with our fellow consumers, over one more hot little island we lower the flaps. Where are we? Only the pilot knows.

ELLEN: I know.

ART: Robert Louis Stevenson's stomping ground perhaps. The last pure corner of the earth. Flowers round our necks, we scour the ruins for artifacts: a carving with conversational breasts for the end table, a rusting Zero with a laughing Japanese skeleton at the controls. Take it home. Sell it in Houston. Exhausted, bored, we lie in the sun, we drink. The tropical nights are too long. We wander apart along the white line of surf. We remove

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our clothes. We lose ourselves, our wives...

[*Slight pause.*]

ELLEN: I haven't been making a spectacle of myself, have I? I won't—unless you suggest a diversionary tactic, unless you tell me to run down the beach screaming. But what shall I scream? Help! My husband's on fire! [*Slight pause.*] I didn't mean to scare your friend away.

ART: You haven't.

ELLEN: He's so unaffected—this one. Just like one would expect a long lost friend to be. They're both lovely, Arthur. I fully approve. You say you knew him before.

ART: Yes.

ELLEN: Her too?

ART: Her too.

ELLEN: Really? How lucky. Isn't it something of a miracle running into people we know, into old almost forgotten friends, miles from anywhere? It's like discovering their picture in a travel folder. There they are, the people we left behind, having a wonderful time, smiles on their faces. It's almost enough to send us packing after them, worming our way into their happiness, isn't it?

ART: Almost.

ELLEN: You knew them...in middle America, did you. The breadbasket. We've stuck to the coasts haven't we, Arthur? So much more civilized. You always dreaded the interior. Are you listening to me? You do remember this past life you once related over drinks?

ART: I was a young man.

ELLEN: Is that a quote? I didn't think you were ever young.

ART: I was then.

ELLEN: Hmm. Then she was too. I wish I'd seen her when she was young.

ART: Yes, I wish you had.

ELLEN: Only I didn't exist then. I didn't know you yet.

ART: I was there for the summer. She was there forever. I knew her when she had all the time in the world. Now I see her again when she is running out of time. I see her whole life before me.

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ELLEN: Is hers the only life you see? Poor woman. How did it feel to her then, I wonder. So many years locked up in the hinterland, the haunted wood where Arthur's young face floats at night. Will the sleeping beauty sleep forever? How can one man disentangle the wasted loveliness from all those timeless trees? But Arthur's too smart for us all. Arthur's set the wood on fire. Now he gallops into the flames riding out with childhood's love across his saddle, his grown-up hand on her white bottom. Is this you, Arthur? You who watch us when we fall? Who stands there waiting while we pick ourselves up again? How could you ever save anyone? Have you noticed my neck lately? My mouth? The edges of my mouth? I'm running out of time too, Arthur! How does it feel to me? But you're not afraid of a little spectacle now, are you? The native police. The threat of scandal. Bribes.

ART: I want to know I'm still alive.

ELLEN: Don't go, Arthur! We're in our house at night. Firelight. Our books. You're in your chair. I rise up naked from the fire. I'm going to sit on you in your chair, Arthur. You won't have to do anything, anything...

[*She stops, lowers her face into the sand. Pause.*]

ART: You see? How quickly it returns—the silence. I sometimes wonder if we brought it with us. [*Reciting.*]

"Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly—
Mere puppets they who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro."

[*He looks at his watch.*]

ELLEN [*Not looking up*]: I wouldn't object.

ART: That's very understanding.

ELLEN: Really. I think you ought to. You won't have to worry about Ed.

ART: I won't? Very good. I'll try not to worry about Ed.

ELLEN: You'll come back? You'll tell me everything?

ART: Yes.

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ELLEN [*Very gently*]: Later, I'll read to you. I'll read until you fall asleep.

[*Exit* ART.]

ELLEN [*To herself, still not looking up*]: Soft temporary words . . . like snowflakes.

[*Pause. Enter* ED.]

ELLEN [*Not looking*]: Looking for someone? [*Looking at him.*] Is it possible in the jet age, is it still possible for people to disappear? There's no point in looking. They've turned themselves into birds, tropical birds. They're on another island. Sit down, Ed. Let me tell you what's happening.

ED [*Not sitting*]: Tell me.

ELLEN: Dribble. Dribble sand on me. It helps me think.

ED [*Pouring a handful of sand on her*]: Think.

ELLEN: Why? Why should I? Our thoughts aren't so important. Only theirs matter. They have all the memories, the hopes. There's nothing for us, except to live as well as we can—in the shadow of those days they shared. Arthur's probably talking.

ED: Is he? What does he talk about to you?

ELLEN: Oh, friendship, fidelity. Eternal things. What does he talk about to you? [*Slight pause.*] You don't want to tell me what he talks about to you? [*Slight pause.*] I understand. Friends . . . discussing, wanting, missing some small slip of a girl . . . when it was always a conversation between them, Arthur and Ed—as though she were insubstantial and those male fingers went right through.

ED: No.

ELLEN: No? Then maybe we're insubstantial too. Though I'm hoping the little people will want to read about us. I call my book *Cashing In.* Chapter IX: "Our Trip." Listen: "En route. Sound of the plane. The plane through the air. A sense of movement better than movement itself. Cocktails. *Newsweek.* Clouds. Thick clouds. Flying through thick clouds. Look at Arthur. Note Arthur's rising interest. Follow his eyes. Will it be the same again? Why only couples? Why . . ."

ED: Why . . .

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ELLEN: Be quiet. "Are they another simpler us with a better claim to existence? Another innocent wife, I suppose. Arthur's eyes. Arthur's white fists. Could this be the child-woman he knew in another cleaner life? Will he convince HER he knew her before in some clean corner of the earth? Hope so. My life was easier then. Turbulence. Speed of sound. Destination: innocence." Ed, beware. When a sophisticated worldly couple meets some just plain folks from back home, what happens?

ED: You tell me.

ELLEN: Don't be naive! Why do you exist anyway, except to satisfy our desires? [*Shaking off sand.*] I'm hot. I don't want this hot sand all over me. My body temperature is not to be believed. [*Turning over on her back.*] Would you like to see my breasts? Let me stick them in your eyes. I'm so bored! When we do. . . something—I'm not sure what you'd call it—I lie very still so I don't disturb his thoughts. And then, suddenly, he's not thinking. It's all over. He's asleep. Immediate deep sleep, you know. About this time, I read. I glance at his temporarily mindless face, and very slowly—not to disturb him—reach one arm out from under. For Thomas Hardy. And lying there, utterly still, crushed, I picture the English countryside. The little inns, the poor. Another age. And I. . . I am walking across the moors with Tess and the redding man and Jude. Empty brown moors. My sweaty body, my feet through the dust, my strong woman's hands. And this sense. . . this feeling that nothing will ever work out. God won't let us work it out, no matter how well we can talk about it. And then there's death. The heather changes. . . color. . . like trees. . .

[*Slight pause.* ED *touches her momentarily.*]

ELLEN: I'm boring you.

ED: No.

ELLEN: You touched me, didn't you? Why did you do that?

ED: I don't know. I couldn't say it the way you can.

ELLEN: Try.

[*Slight pause.*]

ED: Your eyes.

ELLEN: What about my eyes?

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ED: They're different from your voice, but then your voice changed too.
ELLEN: Changed? How? How are my eyes different?
ED: I don't know. They weren't meant for the kind of listening you do.
ELLEN: How do you know? What else was I meant for?
ED: Not that.
ELLEN: But something is better than nothing, isn't it? I'm nothing. Arthur tells me what to do.
ED: And you do it?
ELLEN: Yes.
ED: Everything?
ELLEN: Everything.
ED: I remember when I . . . just stop listening to him.
ELLEN: I'm listening now.
ED: Don't.
ELLEN: I can't help it. Say something! [*Slight pause.*] Say something!
ED: What's he saying?
ELLEN: "A little longer," he's saying, "a little longer. I'm almost through."
ED: With her.
ELLEN: Yes, with her, with you, with me. With all of us for a while. He'll sleep. Imagine his sleeping face. Where's my book? Now you don't like me, what I do. Even my eyes. . . . You see, Arthur taught me how to kill—with words, with motion, with other people—how to kill the minutes, the hours. Why are you sitting here? Can you imagine . . . ! She's dirty now. She's crying. Go take a look.

[*Slight pause.*]

ED: I don't think I want . . .
ELLEN: Then picture the others, who followed you—men, women, couples—all somehow convinced, when left behind, of their own dirtiness. Here Arthur got a chance he never had before—a second chance. No one comes back to Arthur. Only I. Again and again. Why did you let him in again? Why did you?

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[*Pause.*]

ED [*Calmly*]: We used to walk out together to Joanne's house.

ELLEN: I know.

ED: We lay down where we could see a great distance. We thought we were looking into the future, that we would do the things we dreamed of, that we would always be the people we were then. We talked. He talked. I only spoke in the spaces that he left. I listened mostly . . . just like you.

ELLEN: I wish . . . I wish I could have told you not to.

ED: We saw Joanne coming towards us across the fields . . .

[*Pause. He sits.*]

ELLEN: I'm listening. To you. He's asleep. You sleep too. Then I'll sleep. And we'll walk together across brown moors. You'll be with me. Do you hear? You'll be with me. In my dreams. And no one will know we slept while the others lived. No one will ever know. [*Putting her arms around him.*] Feel. Feel my breasts against your eyes? My heart? You don't put your hands in me. You don't stand back and laugh. And talk. And talk. And talk. [*Holding his head between her hands.*] Look. Look into me, please, into my eyes. I want to be seen again by you. Then we'll sleep. We'll dream . . .

[*Light fades.*]

[*Another part of the beach lit only by moonlight.* JOANNE, *disheveled, lies face down in the sand.* ARTHUR *sits on his heels at several paces looking at her.*]

ART:

"That motley drama!—oh, be sure
It shall not be forgot!
With its Phantom chased forever more,
By a crowd that seize it not,
Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the self-same spot,
And much of Madness and more of Sin
And Horror the soul of the plot."

[*Slight pause.*]

ART: Remember our nights of poetry, Joanne? Poe, 1847, his

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child bride dying in his arms. Poor Virginia, or was it Lenore? I can still hear your voice: "Tell me what to do, Arthur! Tell me what you want me to do!" You were so clean.

JOANNE: I don't remember.

ART: You remember the way Ed and I waited for you, the way you two sat at my feet, the words, Poe's words . . . what don't you remember?

JOANNE: Any of it.

ART: You remember me. You recognized me across the aisle of our 747. And a few moments ago, I thought I heard your voice: "Arthur, Arthur!"

JOANNE: So?

ART: So. What don't you remember?

JOANNE: The things you say. The way you describe them. I remember my house, the hill behind it where I met you and Ed. I remember us lying there, reading, each reading his own book, and those big soft mid-western clouds moving silently overhead. We used to identify them. Remember? We saw Abraham Lincoln once.

ART: I wonder if he saw us.

JOANNE: You don't remember?

ART: No.

JOANNE: And I, the woman, I was worried, just because I knew it couldn't last, and I begged you: "Arthur, tell me what to do, what you think I should do . . . to save this."

ART: I don't remember that.

JOANNE: You never touched me . . .

ART: I remember I could see through your blouse.

JOANNE: . . . and yet you knew I had somehow more respect for you.

ART: I remember looking into your eyes when I read to you; you, listening to me with your mouth partly open. Remember the time I put my finger in your mouth—and you let me? We'd been eating berries, and I was picking seeds from your teeth.

JOANNE: I don't remember. I came to you one night on the hill. It was almost dark. I loved you both, but I loved you better. I left it for you to say.

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ART: We talked about you, Ed and I. "How will she sit today? Will she lean backwards again when she laughs?" We laughed knowingly, each of us alone at night, thinking of you.
JOANNE: I thought of you too.
ART [*Moving closer*]: Ah, our memories merge.
JOANNE: Do they?
ART: Yes. On those lonely young nights, thinking of me... And now..?
JOANNE: Now? Over the years, looking back...
ART: To me.
JOANNE: To that time.
ART: To me. You thought of me.
JOANNE: Yes. I thought of you. I imagined you. You were my dream.
ART [*Feeling her*]: I was there, in your mind, even then...
JOANNE [*Quietly, unresisting*]: Don't touch me.
ART: Why not?
JOANNE: That part's over.
ART: Is it? Dream if you want. Imagine it's twenty years ago.
JOANNE: There's no point. I must have been mistaken then.
ART: You begged me to save that time.
JOANNE: But you didn't. This isn't you, is it Arthur? [*He stops touching her.*] We feel such different things now...why not then? There must not have been one moment when we felt the same. We might have been islands, thousands of miles apart. We're closer now...and I'm just a thing you put your hands in. I never knew you.

[*Pause.*]

ART: I remember that night on the hill. You wanted me to speak, but you were saying it already, in your eyes.
JOANNE: But you didn't see it then.
ART: No, but I see it now, Joanne, looking back.
JOANNE: It doesn't matter now, Art. We've both woken up.
ART: Forgive me.
JOANNE: There's nothing to forgive. It doesn't hurt any longer.

[*Pause.*]

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ART: And now?
JOANNE: Now? Nothing.
ART: Nothing?
[*Pause.*]
JOANNE: There's really nothing left to say, is there?
ART: No.
[*The light fades.*]

[*The part of the beach seen earlier. Moonlight, no colored lights.* ED *sitting with his back against a tree,* ELLEN *lying on her back looking at the stars. Enter* ART *and* JOANNE *separately. She stands at some distance.*]
ART:

"But see, amid the mimic rout,
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food."

[*Slight pause.*]
ED: I'm sorry. I don't know that one.
ART: You don't? But you remember Ed and Arthur and Joanne on a hill beneath the clouds. Three people of the past who had looked into the future together and called it good. Is this the future now? Are we those people still? [*Differently.*] Remember the trees we climbed, Ed. Joanne climbed highest. We were looking up at her. Our eyes met. We were friends then. We had looked under her dress together. Are you listening?
ED: Yes.
ART: Remember that night, roommate, I came back so late. You didn't say anything. Were you asleep? Were you asleep?
ED: I don't remember.
ART: She came to me that night, on the hill behind her house. She wanted to tell me then that it wasn't you at all, that she couldn't go on loving you just that little bit less. I saw it all then. Her future, mine, these last few minutes on the beach. It was all there in her eyes. Do you understand? I saw your whole

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damn life before me. Then!

ED: I understand.

ART: I didn't take her up, Ed. I didn't ride off with her that night. I left her for you. I'm leaving her again.

ED: Thank you.

ART: Ed holds onto his secretions, the pearl of his despair. It must be a bowling ball by now. Can't you get mad, animal? What are you afraid of? Hurting me?

[*Slight pause.*]

ED: We never fought.

ART: Didn't we? We were boys, weren't we? I thought we fought all the time.

ED: Never.

ART: You taught me how to wrestle. I taught you how to box.

ED: No.

ART: Well, it's not too late. [*Kicking sand at him.*] See. This is how it's done in the comics. Remember? Only there it's the big dumb animal who kicks the sand. Come on. Don't you want to? Where's your pride? There's not a moment in your life that's yours. You two were never together without me. Come on, clumsy. I killed your whole damn life. Kill me! Kill me!

[ARTHUR *no longer dancing around,* ED *has not moved. Pause.*]

ELLEN [*Not moving*]: There now. You see how quickly it stops? The silence returns all by itself. I wonder if we brought it with us. [*Turning to look at him.*] Would you like us all to kill you, Arthur? The three of us could tear you limb from limb and throw the pieces in the sea. We'd just leave something here, of course, as proof that you had lived or not lived, or at least been alive a little while, long enough to remember, here, by this tree, your pale white privates soft as figs and, of course, your tongue.

[ED *stands, goes to* JOANNE. *They are about to leave.*]

ELLEN [*Sitting up, to* ED & JOANNE]: The show's over, folks. Arthur doesn't need you anymore. [*To* ART.] We can let these nice people go, can't we?

ART: Yes.

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ELLEN: You see, he speaks for himself. But where do old friends go when they disappear for good? [*To* ART.] But it doesn't matter, does it? Only the moment counts. This is the good life, isn't it? And we are the beautiful people.

JOANNE: Goodbye, Arthur.

[*Exit* ED & JOANNE. *Slight pause.*]

ART:

"Out—out are the lights, out all!
And over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
And the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm."

ELLEN:

"And let the burial rite be read—
The funeral song be sung—
A dirge for the most lovely dead
That ever died so young!
...The sweet Lenore
Hath 'gone before'
With young hope at her side
And thou art wild
For the dear child
That should have been thy bride."

[*Slight pause.*]

ART: You can do it too.

ELLEN: Yes.

[*Light fades.*]

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Mary Alice Ayers, a native New Yorker, now lives in South Florida; her stories have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Four Quarters*, and other literary magazines.

R. Michael Benson, formerly a resident immigrant in Peru, has returned to the United States to teach private school in Cade, Louisiana. He has published in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Tales*, *Beloit Poetry Journal* and other literary magazines.

T. Coraghessan Boyle is the author of *Descent of Man* and *Water Music*, both published by Atlantic/Little, Brown. His stories have appeared in *The Atlantic, Harpers, Penthouse, Antaeus,* and other magazines. He lives in California.

Allan Gurganus teaches at Sarah Lawrence College. His short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *American Review* and other magazines. He is currently at work on a novel called *White People: The Erotic History of a Southern Baptist Church, 1888–1914.*

POETRY

Milo De Angelis lives in Milan. He has published a collection of poetry, *Resemblances* (1976), a prose fairy tale, *Luca's Trip* (1979), and a critical work, *Poetry and Destiny* (1982). A new collection of poems, *Land of the Face*, will be published by Mondadori. He edits the magazine *niebo.*

Harold Brodkey is the author of a collection of stories, *First Love and Other Sorrows*, and a forthcoming novel, *Party of Animals.* His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *American Review*, among other magazines and has been widely anthologized. He grew up in the Midwest and lives in New York City.

Bill Knott's new collection of poems, *Becos*, will be published next spring by Random House. He is currently teaching at Emerson College in Boston.

John Peck had the Rome Prix Fellowship of the National Academy—Institute for Arts and Letters in 1981. His most recent publication is *The Broken Blockhouse Wall* by Godine. He is currently living in Rome.

Reg Saner's second book, *So This Is The Map*, was Derek Walcott's selection in the 1981 National Poetry Series competition and was published by Random House. Mr. Saner lives in Boulder, Colorado, where he teaches at the University of Colorado.

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David Shapiro's most recent books include *Jim Dine, Poetry and Painting* and *Lateness*. A new book of poetry is forthcoming this spring from Overlook/Viking. He is teaching at William Paterson College, Cooper Union and Princeton this year.
Lawrence Venuti translates both contemporary Italian poetry and prose, and won the P.E.N. American Center's Renato Poggioli Award for Translation from the Italian. He teaches in the English Department at Temple University.

INTERVIEWS

John McCall is a freelance writer living in Ocean City, New Jersey. He has published in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, *Dark Horse*, *Perspective* and *Stock Pot*.
A portion of the Malcolm Cowley interview was adapted from a conversation between Malcom Cowley and Dick Cavett aired on January 29, 1979.
George Plimpton's most recent books include *Edie: An American Biography* [with Jean Stein] published by Alfred A. Knopf and *A Sports Bestiary* [with Arnold Roth] from McGraw-Hill. Both were published this year.
John Seabrook an ex-*Paris Review* editorial assistant, is now studying at Worcester College, Oxford.

ART

Donald Baechler was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1956, and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings have been shown at The Drawing Center, New York, Hallwalls, Buffalo, and Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.
Mike Glier was born in Kentucky in 1953, and lives in New York. His work has been exhibited at Annina Nosei Gallery, New York, Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, and NAME Gallery, Chicago.
Keith Haring was born in 1958 and lives in New York. His graffiti-like drawings and paintings have been shown at "Documenta 7", Kassel, West Germany, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, and in the New York City subways.
Barbara Kruger was born in Newark, New Jersey, and currently lives in New York. Her photographic works have been included in recent exhibitions at The Art Institute of Chicago, "Documenta 7", Kassel, West Germany, and Annina Nosei Gallery, New York.

PLAY

Michael McGuire is the author of numerous plays—among them, *Help*, a companion one-act to *Islands*, which recently ran six months in Germany. His stories have appeared in various literary magazines including *The Hudson Review* and *New Directions in Poetry and Prose*. He is currently doing a residency at Yaddo where he is completing a novella.

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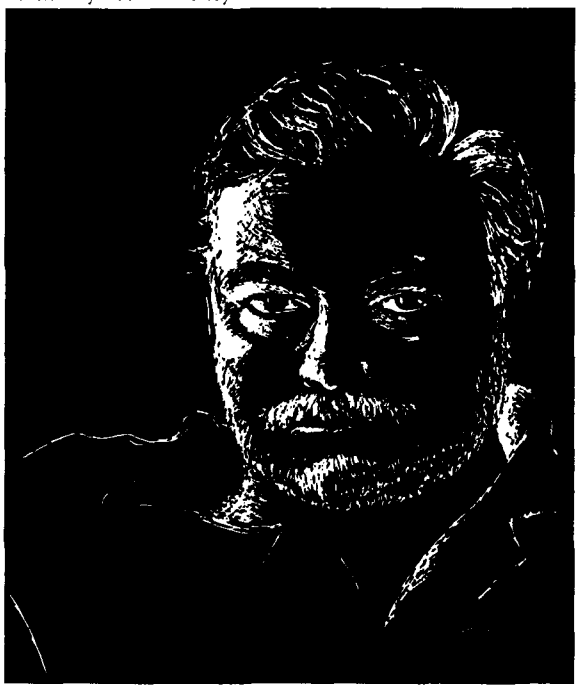

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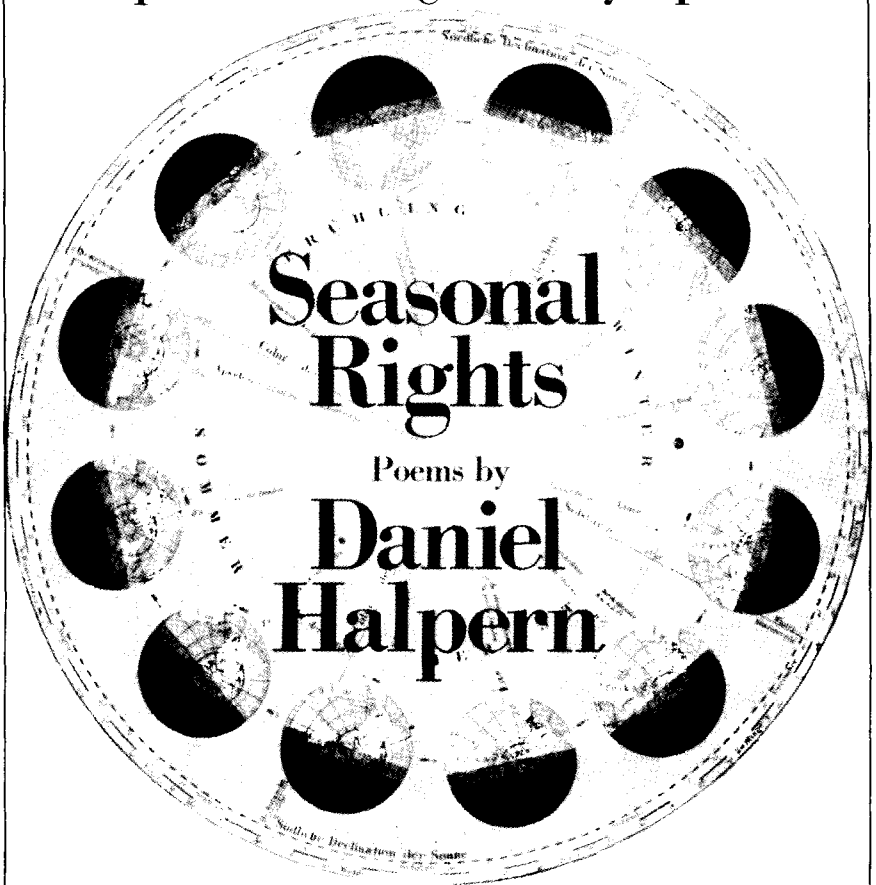

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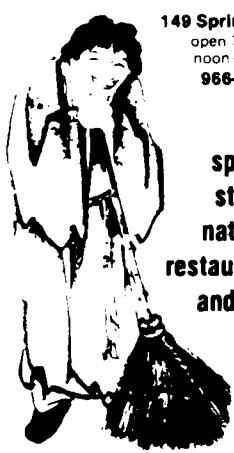

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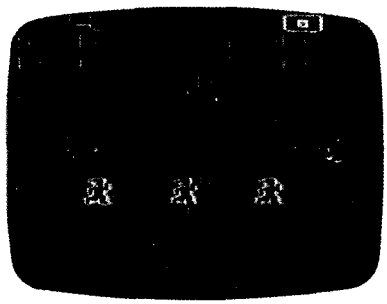

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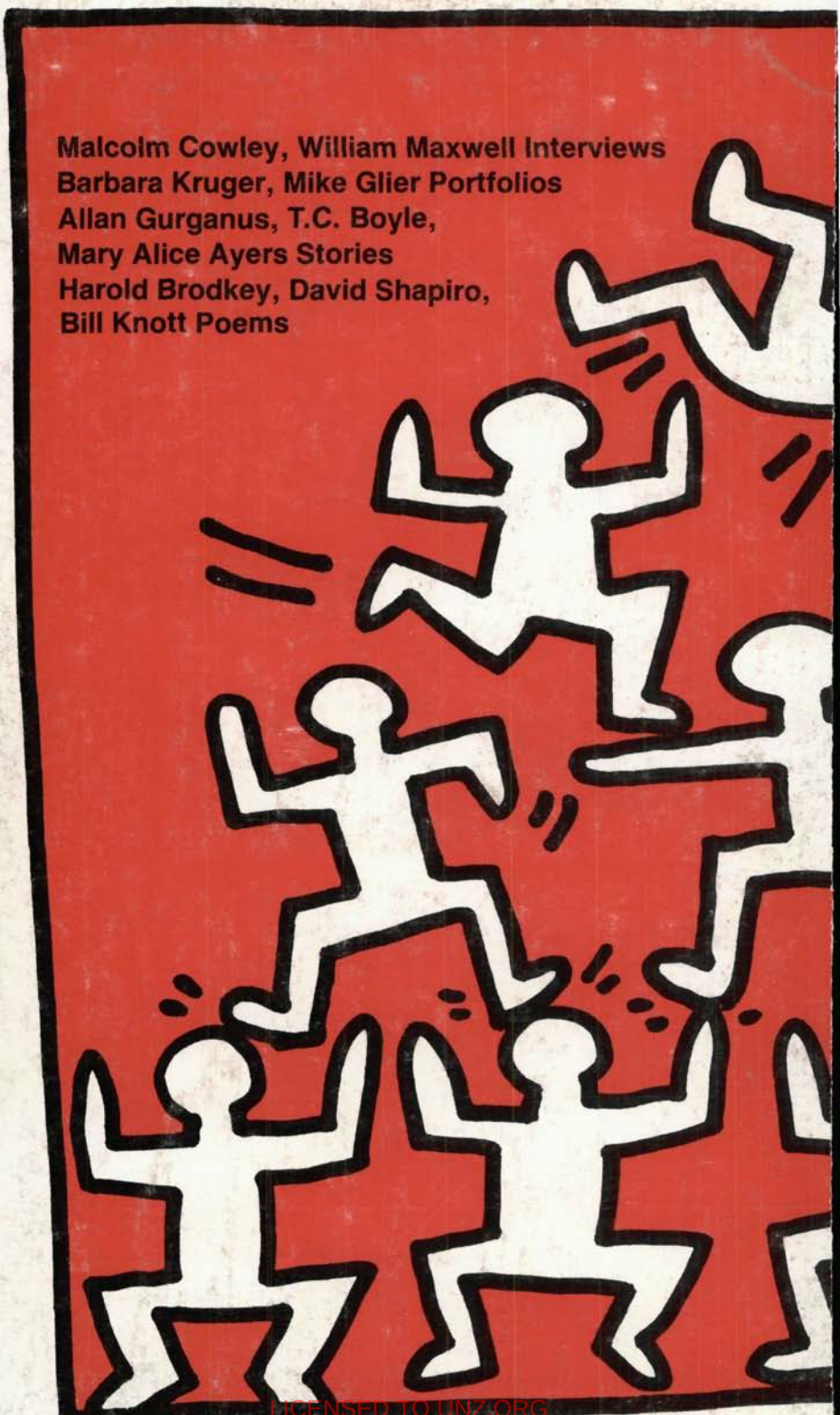

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